The Spy Who Came from the Cold

by rotrude

Summary

Man from U.N.C.L.E AU. It's 1962 and the cold war rages. SIS agent Arthur Pendragon is entrusted with a highly sensitive mission, extricating an asset from East Berlin. A KGB operative might just have it as his Moscow-sanctioned objective to stop him.

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Notes

Look to the bottom for a link to LFB72's magnificent spy!Merlin art, which is all very thrilleresque and 60s-inspired and gorgeous to look at! Thank you so much LFB72! Your generosity left me speechless!

Note (ii): This is now being beta'd by the lovely and kind detochkina, who's watching over my grammar, spelling mistakes, lack of hyphenation, and Russian mispellings too! (I'm so lucky.) It's being edited on the fly, chapter by chapter, (currently up to three), but the story stays up while this happens.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Checkpoint Charlie, (52.5075° N, 13.3903°), East Berlin, Monday, 22nd November 1962, 10.00 pm

Arthur secures the knot to his tie, picks up his briefcase, and strides towards the checkpoint. It's a low squat shed, painted white, erected past a sign that warns diplomatic travellers they're leaving the city sector controlled by the Americans. To its side a lane unrolls. On the orders of the Volks Polizei, cars stop for checks, searches, and heat scans. Arthur makes a point to look straight ahead and not to the side, to the acts of the border guards, to the responses of the queuers. He gives his passport -- not too new, a little creased -- to the guard in the shed, and stands straight.

"Why are you entering East Berlin, Mr Pendragon?" the guard asks, his German soft spoken, as he examines Arthur's documents.

As he undergoes the guard's scrutiny, Arthur keeps his face blank. “It's a simple matter of business on behalf of the British Foreign Minister.”

The guard closes Arthur's passport and hands it back. “Are you taking any luggage with you?”

“My briefcase.” Arthur lifts it so the man in the shed can see it. “Nothing else.”

“Mind if I look inside?” the guard says, turning the briefcase around.

“Of course not.” Arthur knows there's no other answer he can give, so he puts on as easy as smile as he can. It's a little smarmy perhaps, but that's how it comes out. “Do with it as you please.”

With a click of the latches, the guard opens the briefcase. He moves Arthur's clothes aside, searches between their layers, crisp shirts, pressed linen trousers. He unzips his toiletry bag and paws Arthur's personal hygiene items, lingering on a pair of scissors and Arthur's disposable razor, a flimsy plastic gadget, then seals it again. He searches the briefcase's lining, probes it with tugs, and hammers along the bottom with his fists. When he finds nothing worth his while, he closes it and says, “You can go.”

“Thank you,” Arthur says, retrieving the briefcase. “Have a good night, Wachtmeister.”

Arthur's been in East Berlin a grand total of five times and all of them on behalf of his direct superiors at Century House. The first two times there was no wall at all, only officers belonging to different army groups checking passports. Nowadays, there's a wall and a watchtower, zig-zag barriers, a multi-lane shed, and lines of barbed wire. Rumour has it trip wires lurk under soil clumps between sections of the perimeter barriers. The buildings that once rose close to the wall are gone, swept off by bulldozers, allowing for a clear view of the strip of land between the East and the cement partition bordering with the West.

The pavement shines with the residue of today's rain. It dampens the façade of the grey buildings lining the street neighbouring the Friederich Strasse road block. Their paint is flaking off in huge chunks of disparate size. They look like tears in their fabric, like bilious discolourations in the uniformity of their matte greyness. In the streets closest to the frontier with the West, bricks bar windows, layer upon layer of them, in tight formation, from base to top of the frame. A few street lamps shine on the stretch of street that goes deep East, a halo around the bead.

Arthur pulls up his collar and slinks into the narrowest alley he can find. He knows the address. He
committed it to memory before starting on the mission. He doesn't make for it. Instead he starts on a zigzag pattern that has no predictability to it and pricks his ears for signs of pursuit.

No shadow tails him; no footsteps sound in the wake of his. It's like that for miles. He walks to the cadence of his breath, footfall even, a military one-two, one-two that's ingrained in him. A clang echoes along the residential street, an alto of a noise. Arthur flattens himself against the span of a rugged brick wall, a tattered poster for a cabaret show brushing against the tips of his fingers, water from a drain trickling on his neck where his collar doesn't reach. He slows his breathing, concentrates on the noises around him. Only the hum of night in a big city surrounds him. Moonlight shimmers across the surface of a stagnant puddle and shines off the windscreens of lone passing cars. No one wanders by barring a cat that flounces past with its tail up. Arthur's shoulders slump and he sighs, a fat gustful of air that tastes like the damp of the night.

Once again, Arthur pushes off his dark corner and continues walking down an equally dark stretch of road. It's straight, buildings on one side, a fenced field, bare of most plants, on the other. A basketball net lies on the ground next to a vertical concrete slab, the netting sliced across and gaping open.

Arthur pushes his hands in his coat pockets, his chin into his collar, and turns left.

A sharp right turn takes him deeper into a knot of streets he wouldn't be able to tell apart if he hadn't carefully studied the layout of the city before. He had old maps to work off, and some of them are no longer viable, but the general set up hasn't changed much in recent years, so he can make do.

He takes a few turns, traipses down shortcuts that take him along narrow alleys snaking between buildings, and starts on a number of strategic detours.

The door to the garage stands open, the glow of electric lights spilling outwards from the inside. Cars are up on lifts. Most have their bonnets up. A variety of cables and wires tangle inside them in multi coloured strands, open to the view. Oil stains pool on the floor together with tool boxes, containing spanners, ratchet sets, pliers, screw-drivers.

Feet stick out from under one of the cars. They're encased in dirty plimsolls stained with motor oil around the sole line.

Arthur gives the shoe a kick. “Mithian Nemeth, I assume.”

“I can't fix your car,” Mithian says from under the belly of the motor she's fiddling with. It's a light yellow Trabant with a busted headlight and a front bumper that's barely holding on. “If you're in a hurry, I can send you on to Maxi, but he won't be able to do a thing till next week either. No spare parts.”

“I'm not here for my car,” Arthur says, switching languages and going from German to English. “I actually left my car in West Berlin.”

The dolly slides out from under the car, the woman atop it. She's the same Mithian Nemeth from the photos Arthur saw of her, a dark haired, doe-eyed beauty with a clever face and a proud bearing. “West Berlin?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you?” Mithian brushes her arms across her face, spreading several new layers of dirt across it. They smudge her face in charcoal patterns that highlight the smoothness of her brow and the arch of her cheekbones. “And what the hell are you doing here?”
“Arthur Pendragon,” Arthur says, sticking his hands in his pockets as he wanders around the dolly. “I'm here to extricate you.”

“Extricate me?” Mithian frowns so deep her brow shows furrows. “What does that even mean?”

“Get you out of East Berlin.” Arthur picks up a throttle valve and smears his fingers with grease. “Pull you from behind the Iron Curtain.”

Mithian yanks herself upright in one fluid motion. “You must be joking.”

Arthur wipes his fingers on a handkerchief. It's Indian cotton, has a double stitch hem and is monogrammed in the corner. The initials aren't really Arthur's – he's not as stupid as all that – but they're a tasteful addition, a little moniker of tradition, the one he was born to. “I would never joke about this. I'm professional like that.”

“You have to be Stasi.” Mithian's eyes grow smaller and pinched at the corners with several thin lines. “You're trying to test my loyalty to the socialist credo.”

Arthur pockets the soiled handkerchief. “No. Wrong man for that, believe me. Born in a Castle, one with a moat, went to Eton, no Marx or Stalin for me. I'm Six.”

“As in SIS?” Mithian snorts, dumps her spanner on a tray table and makes big eyes at him. “You're having me on.”

“Why would I?” Arthur watches Mithian Nemeth closely, the way she moves, the way she talks. She shifts about with poise and elegance. She sounds well-educated, her turn of phrase a little old world, her German accent nearly disappearing in the melodious strands of her fluent English.

“Because no British spy that I know of would bother rescuing a common East German girl from behind the Iron Curtain.”

“But you're not a common East German girl, are you?” Arthur nocks up an eyebrow. “You're the daughter of Rodor Nemeth, the nuclear scientist.”

“You're wrong.” Mithian crosses her arms. “My father is no scientist. He's a phone company employee.”

“Your adoptive father most certainly is.” Arthur strolls to and fro across the length of the repair shop floor. “But your biological father is indeed the man I'm talking about.”

Mithian's mouth twists sideways. “I haven't seen him since I was a child. If you think I'm your lead to a new generation atom bomb, you're barking up the wrong tree.”

“That may be true.” Arthur rolls back his shoulders. “But you're still his daughter and reportedly he loves you very much.”

“So what?” Mithian says. “You think you can use me as a pawn?”

“I think we can come to a mutually beneficial understanding.” Arthur zeroes in on Mithian's face, attempts to establish a connection with her. It's the mission, true, but he wouldn't be loath to have her as an ally anyway. If the report he read on her is anything to go by, her skills shouldn't be undervalued. “You get out of East Berlin. Your father gets to see you again. The bad people who've kidnapped your father to get their hands on his nuclear warhead knowledge don't get to use it for their nefarious purposes. It's a win-win scenario.”
“Let’s say that I’m interested.” Mithian narrows her eyes. “When would we be doing it?”

Arthur paces to the back of the shop and looks out the rear window. It's more of a slit really, glazed over by a dirty opaque slab of glass, but that suits his purpose well. Through it he can watch the street from one end to the other without being observed in turn. The road seems empty. Lamp light shines on asphalt, greying it in places. A fence encloses a garden; the base of a swing, a square of metal and foil, shimmers in the moonlight. The pavement is bare of people. A few cars station along the kerb's length, a few other past the bend in the road. Arthur recognises a couple of EMWs – and a Wartburg. Nothing else seems to be worthy of notice but for a glimmer coming from behind the windscreen of a Moskvitch parked a few hundred yards away from the repair shop. “Right now.”

“What do you mean right now?” Mithian asks, her mouth parting with the surprise of it. “I don’t even have a change of clothes to bring with me.”

Arthur studies her mechanic garb. With its oily patches and grease stains it does stand out. “We’ll buy you something as soon as you hit the West. Now’s not the time for hesitation. I think we’re being followed.”

Mithian brushes past him on her way to the window.

Arthur grabs her elbow and tells her. “Don’t. It’s dangerous.”

“And what do you propose I do now?”

Arthur surveys the cars in the repair shop. Most of them have their wiring on show, up in tangles and clamped in places. “Have you got a working car in here?”

“I can get any car to work in ten minutes flat.”

“Then I suggest you get busy.”

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The leather is cracked but soft enough. His sweat makes the skin of his face stick to it, but if he angles his head every now and then it's not so bad. His legs, however, are curled up to his torso. His knees are bent at a rather sharp angle. Because of this, his muscles are tense as cables and about to cramp. There's a tautness to his calf that makes him want to sort the kink out, walk miles, run on it. His quads pull too, with the kind of tug that's close to pain, to a burn. Arthur takes his mind off the discomfort by assembling the items he neds for gun reconstruction. He extracts the barrel hidden in his heel, the hammer from his key-chain. He picks at the studs in his belt and gathers them in his palm. One by one he slides them in the pistol's chamber. He puts the barrel back into the slide, pushes the recoil springs into their hole in the slide, and hooks the base of it onto the barrel cut-out. The silencer comes on last.

“A car is following us,” Mithian says, seeking his eyes into the rear-view mirror. “It could be a coincidence, but…”

Arthur cocks his gun's hammer and says, “It isn't.” In spy games such as the one they're playing, there are no coincidences. “Slow down at the next traffic light.”

Mithian laughs. It's a little sharp, but it doesn't sound like pure panic. “Was I supposed to burn through it?”
Arthur focuses on tuning his ears to the sounds the other car makes. “Can you tell me whether the driver's trying to line up with us?”

Mithian cocks her head to the side. “Yes. He is.”

“All right.” So it was exactly how Arthur suspected. “Is he looking over?”

Mithian hums.

"Has he only one hand on the steering wheel?"

Mithian tilts her head a notch, steals a glance sideways, and makes a noise low in her throat.

Arthur pulls the safety off his gun. “In that case we may be dealing with a KGB spy.”

“Fantastic.” Mithian inches the car forward. It rumbles as it goes.

“At my go,” Arthur says, holding the gun steady between both hands, “I want you to floor that accelerator.”

Mithian humphs.

Stretching his leg a little, Arthur lowers the car window with his foot. It's a laborious process because he loses purchase every few seconds. Just as often the window groans and moans with a lack of oiling, a symphony of disuse, and Arthur's blood runs cold with every bloody sound it makes. It's like the furious clucking of a dying hen. If he alerts the KGB man to his presence in the back of the vehicle, they're done. Nothing happens however and slowly, screech by screech, the window comes down. When he feels the wind in his face, he springs up to a sitting position, identifies his mark and shoots.

As Mithian accelerates, Arthur collides hard with his seat.

“Are we rid of him?” Mithian asks, both hands on the steering wheel and eyes on the road.

“No.” Arthur grits his teeth. “He has mad reflexes, unfortunately for us.”

Mithian floors the accelerator.

Arthur turns around so he can see what's going on with the car tailing them. “The stubborn bastard is gaining on us.”

“I can see that,” she says, narrowing her eyes at the rear-view mirror. “What do we do?”

“Drive along this road and then take a sharp turn left.” Arthur watches the other car almost get even with theirs. “Don't advertise your intentions.”

“Easier said than done,” Mithian says, keeping to the middle of the lane. “I'll try my best.”

The engine burrs and strains. The car sidles this way and that.

Arthur barks, “Turn now!”

Tyres screeching, the car veers sharply left. It nearly tilts sideways and Arthur slides down the seat and had to grab at the handle and flatten a hand on the road to stay put. They speed along a narrow street with buildings leaning close. They blur past a whirl of concrete, grey patches of masonry, and graffiti smeared walls.
The other car is still following them.

“He won’t give up, will he?” Arthur says, wondering who the hell Moscow has sent to go head to head with him. “Mithian, turn right.”

The car purrs into the turning. Its frame shakes, its chassis judders, and the tyres sing. Arthur turns round and aims at their shadow. He fires two shots and the other vehicle’s tyres flame. The car swerves, slows, and crashes into a barrier.

Arthur smiles. “That should get you sorted.” He puts the safety back on the gun and tells Mithian, “When the next turn comes, head for the main road.”

“Are you sure?” Mithian catches his eyes in the rear-view. “Won’t we be getting more unwanted attention on such a wide boulevard?”

“That guy who was following us—” Arthur cocks his head at the back window. “He will have alerted his mates anyway.”

Mithian drives them along a broad avenue lined by square structures painted a light grey that shines as white in the night. Arthur has his bearings and knows they're a mile short of the border. It's a tremendously well-guarded one, but he has several contingency plans as to how to get out. He never leaves these things to luck.

“Arthur,” Mithian says, tipping her head up to meet his gaze in the mirror. “I think we're still being tailed.”

“It's impossible. I shot his car down.” Arthur vaults round. He makes out the shape a man running after their own vehicle. There's no doubt as to his being the same pursuer as before. In the glow of the headlights Arthur can make out his features, too. They're softer than Arthur would have thought them. Though they're encased in a face that makes allowance for keen lines and cutting edges, they have the suppleness of youth to them. There's an overall sharpness to the man in general that's remarkable, a kind of angularity that works to make of his face a noteworthy assemblage of features, straight nose, pointy chin, fine bones. He's tall and lean, spare even, with slim legs that have the gangliness of boyhood, but that pump as fast as an athlete's. Arthur must concede, their KGB shadow is after all a damnedly fast runner. He's almost catching up with their car. “Go faster!” Arthur tells Mithian.

“I can't!” Mithian half yells. “You're forgetting that this is an Eastern Block car.”

“Just give it your best.”

“I am!” Mithian tells him even as the engine wails the moment she accelerates. As Mithian milks it to the maximum of its capabilities, the car vibrating as if it's about to come apart at the seams. The floor shakes with tremors, with internal somersaults; the windows rattle. “Just shoot him!”

Arthur spins round again and looks at their KGB foil. The veins in his neck stand out from all the running he's doing. His arms pump up and down in wide, air-cleaving motions. And he's puffing out air in vigorous lungfuls that cloud the air with vapour, quivering blasts of breath Arthur almost fancies he can sense. There's something about him, about the earnest face he's making, about his determination to pull his objective off, that stops Arthur from lifting his gun and taking aim. With no impediments between them barring the rear window, Arthur has a clean target. That's not the problem. Besides, Arthur's killed in the line of duty before. To this day he can remember the exact number of victims on his hit list. He also recollects the faces of the men and women he's downed. He does so with a clarity, a sharpness of vision, that astounds him. Overall, he's not new to the kind of
response Mithian's asking of him. Yet his arms feel heavy and his reflexes sluggish in response to it. "No, I... I don't think I can."

"Arthur!" Mithian says, the reflection of her eyes appears wide in the depths of the car's rear-view mirror.

A thumping noise makes Arthur turn round once more. Their KGB shadow makes a grab for the boot of the car. His hands close around the lip of the lid. Arthur thinks he's about to climb onto the actual car when the lid gives and their pursuer stumbles to a fall, the lid crashing after him. The man impacts the asphalt, rolling for a handful of yards before his body comes to a stop. He slumps, head down, shoulders up.

Without the added weight of their pursuer, the car gains speed. Mithian navigates with smooth ease along a tangle of streets that are so dark and long they can't even see the end of them. In spite of this, Mithian orientates herself fine. She handles the car and the quirks of its engine like a rally racer, a mad one, but a good one.

"Get us to the Bernauer Strasse," Arthur says, scoping out the neighbourhood. "Then park the car."

"Did I hear you right?" Mithian asks, cocking her head to the side. "You want me to ditch the car? Our sole means of escape?"

"Trust me, will you?" Arthur got in and out of this city before. He knows how to do this. "Masterminding flights is part of my job description."

They leave the car along a bare strip of pavement that's shadowed by the bulk of a couple of hefty trees whose fronds are fat with leaves. There's no one else around. No vehicles trundle along and no pedestrian passes by. Even so they cross the road the furthest they can from the street lights, stomping across puddles and hopping over potholes. They're over quickly enough. Arthur pushes open a heavy door and ushers them into a building whose first floor is stripped of flats.

"Where are we?"

Arthur shepherds Mithian towards a pale staircase that stands out in the moonshine streaking in from outside. "In a rather handy building."

They climb five flights of stairs, their breathing starting to go quicker the further up they clamber. When they get to the top, Arthur places both hands on a metal door. It's painted white, rusty all over, with an outsize lock that's clogged with dirt and debris. It only yields when Arthur pushes at it with all that he has.

They spill onto the roof. The moon is a perfect roundel in the sky. It doesn't hide behind clouds but shines in a pure wash all over the buildings, the street below, and the no man's land between inner and outer wall.

"There's the West for you," Arthur says, pointing towards the exterior rim of cement. "And your father."

Mithian gazes with intensity at the spot Arthur points out for her. "And how are we supposed to get there?"

Arthur is about to show her, when their pursuer bursts onto the roof, too. He's panting hard, his ribcage shaking with it. He's pale and drawn in the face, with hollows under his cut-glass cheekbones. A deep scratch smears a red line under it. He raises his gun at them, knuckles scraped, arms taut, a subtle shiver to them. But he doesn't shoot.
Arthur's legs root themselves to the ground under him, the feel in them almost absent, or like a phantom echo of something that ought to be remembered but stays elusive. He gazes at their pursuer for the longest time, a pause that's taut not so much with apprehension as with expectation.

The KGB man stares back out of eyes that hold nothing of the coldness Arthur had expected to see in them. Arthur had expected to see in them. The cold angry stare he's been taught would burn in Moscow agents' eyes -- a sign of their soullessness. This pair has a guilelessness to them instead, an earnestness of intent, that seems genuine and that touches something, the clogs of him that move out of instinct, inside Arthur. Yet Arthur can't believe that sincerity is real. Absolutely refuses to.

The moment cracks, dissolves in a downplaying of tension. The KGB man lowers his gun.

Arthur undoes his belt, slinks it over the cable, grips both ends of it, pulley style, and tells Mithian to grab onto him.

She drapes herself around him and they push off. They sail over the roofs of buildings, over the inner wall, over the stretch of mine field that runs in between it and the outer wall. Watchtower soldiers fire some shots at them, but they sound distant, and fall short. Wind in their hair, they slide downwards along the cable and touch ground in West Berlin.

Arthur relinquishes his belt and turns to stare back at the mass of the wall and reflect at what's just gone down. It sits oddly with him, turns something inside him upside down till it stands awfully awry. Arthur wants to right it, tug himself into shape, but he can't because, ostensibly, there's nothing the matter with him but this feeling of wrongness. Before he can make heads or tails of it, the minivan screeches to a halt before them.

“Welcome to West Berlin, Miss Nemeth.” Lieutenant Kay pulls his semi-automatic over his other shoulder and helps Mithian into the back of the van. When she's up, he tells Arthur, “Hopping on, sir?”

“Yes,” Arthur says, slowly turning around to face away from the East and the KGB spy who spared them on that roof in Bernauer Street. “Yes.”
Knuckles raw from the cold, Merlin slips his hands in his pockets. Leaving boot prints in the muddy sludge, he walks to the high perimeter-fence. The guards at the entrance step close together, hoisting their rifles, barring him access.

“Oh come on,” Merlin says, his breath dissolving in a puff of vapour that climbs upwards. “You know I lodge at the barracks.”

“Kennwort.” The youngest-looking of the guards tips his head back. “Ohne Kennwort dürfen sie nicht eintreten.”

“I've been lodging here for weeks.” All the days leading up to the mission. These two berks should know. They must have seen him plenty of times. “You know I know the bloody password.”

The guards stand taller, looking ahead and past Merlin. “Kennwort.”

Merlin's had a bad day, so he'd rather not do this at all. He sidles, shifts his weight, counts to three. Needs must, right. “Eule.”

The guards share a look, lower their weapons and make way for him.

The fence door slides open and, head ducked, Merlin makes his way towards the shadowed mass of the barracks. The building, once a school, is grey and rectangular. Parts of it are still in disrepair, have been since the war, with windows missing their panes and wings their masonry. But the central body has long been cleared of rubble, the fissures in roofs and walls patched up. It's there that Merlin goes, up a flight of steps and down a long white-washed corridor with a pale floor, washed paler by the moonlight emanating from the window at the end of the passageway.

Humming under his breath, a melody from the Tula countryside, he gets his keys out. But when he sees the soles prints in the dust, he stops short. The door is closed and exactly how he left it. There are no scratches around the lock and no paint has flaked off the panels. This corridor gets a lot of traffic during the day, young excited soldiers on their way to their posts, so anybody might have left those prints. Yet they're angled so, with the toe pointed towards the door, that whoever stood there must have faced the entrance. From very, very up close.

Making as little noise as he can, Merlin lifts the side of his jacket and unholsters his gun. With a click, the safety is off.

His weapon at the ready, his instincts getting into fight gear, he kicks the door open.

The lights are off, but two men stand right in the shadow of the window and are highlit by it.

Merlin recognises the spectacles frames and the cut of the jackets, Moscow make, and lowers his arm. “Shit, Sarrumovitch, was this necessary? You have the run of the place anyway.”

General Sarrumovitch says, “Consider it a warning.”
Merlin looks away, mouth drawn, huffs. “What for?”

“You think we don't know what happened tonight?” One side of Sarrumovitch's mouth tilts upwards in a parody of a grin, showing smoke-yellowed teeth.

Merlin pulls the safety of his Makarov on and chucks the weapon at the counter. “I failed. I know I failed. But I won't next time.”

“No, you won't.” Sarrumovitch nods. “We won't allow you to.”

Merlin supposes he's in for another round of threats. He's used to it, has been in one way or the other since he was a child. But this spiel still makes his hackles rise. “I won't fail next time.”

“Good,” Berounov puts in, wandering over to the small armchair sitting by the side of the bed and sinks into it. “That's good, because we're giving you a chance to redeem yourself.”

Merlin doesn't like the sound of this. Not because he doesn't want to get back in Moscow's good graces, but there's something that isn't being said lurking at the edge of this conversation, and that unnerves him. He would very much like to find out what it is and won't feel like he has this under control until he does. “I will. I promise I will.”

“Good, because you're on another mission,” Berounov says, stretching comfortably in Merlin's armchair.

“I thought I was due back to Russia.” Merlin hasn't seen his mother in three years. At this point he's pretty much forgotten what her face looks like. “I thought I'd get my leave.”

“No, you won't,” Sarrumovitch says, his eyes glinting coldly from behind the mirror surface of his spectacles. “You're going where we tell you and that's it.”

“Sir, I haven't been home in a long while.” This may be a futile protest, but he has to make it. His mother, whom he hears from only rarely, when he needn't work his way through loops of security, is sounding sadder and sadder every time he speaks to her. He can tell she misses him. The notion drives a bleeding hole in his heart. “It's not KGB practice to forbid--”

Sarrumovitch grunts. “Do I have to remind you who gives orders here, comrade?” He levels a cold glance at Merlin. “Do I have to to bring your family's plight to attention?” His voice sharpens to sibilants. “As the son of a traitor, of a man sent to the Gulag, I thought you wouldn't like that.” Merlin's blood runs cold. Even so he doesn't let himself spiral into a panic. He stands to attention and tilts his chin up. “No, sir.”

“Good.” Sarrumovitch's jowls tense. “Because we'd read that as a sign of dissension, of counter-revolutionary sympathies.”

“I understand, sir.”

“We'd be forced to believe you and your family are promoting civil unrest and would find ourselves compelled to send your last remaining parent to Siberia, too.”

Merlin closes his eyes, his stomach twisting painfully, in pangs that are worse than those of hunger. “There'll be no need, sir. I'll be glad to start on this new assignment.”

“Good,” Berounov says, with a smile that doesn't exactly look genuine. “We're sending you to Rome.”
“Rome?” Merlin's been sent pretty much everywhere, both to places he had no business to officially be -- that is to say beyond the iron curtain -- and places where he had plenty of reason to go. Cuba came to mind. “But why?”

“Ordinarily we wouldn't tell you.” Sarrumovitch pulls at the fabric of his jacket, smoothing the innumerable wrinkles out. “But I'm going to be generous this time. The girl you should have got--” Sarrumovitch waves his hand about. “Mithian Nemeth. She's the daughter of Rodor Nemeth, a Dresden scientist who worked on nuclear fission during the war years. In '43, Rodor professed himself sick of that twisted, vile regime he served under and turned coat, going over to the Brits.”

“Nuclear.” That's the one word that stands out to Merlin, the one term that puts a thoroughly terrible spin on this. “Shit.”

“Indeed,” Berounov says. “The more so since he's disappeared. The British profess not to know where he is and neither do we. Not exactly”

“Are the British lying?” In the game that they play adversaries often do. Merlin's learnt that by dint of several misadventures, failures even. “Are they trying to keep his location secret?”

“No, we don't think so.” Berounov scratches at his temple. “We believe he's in the hands of the Trollos.”

“Who?” Merlin's eyebrows push up of their own volition.

“Caterina and Giona Trollo.” Berounov stands, walks to the bed, opens the briefcase lying on top of the blanket, and hands him a folder. “They're Italian entrepreneurs.”

“I see.” Merlin opens the folder, which is full of photographs, mostly long-shot and therefore surveillance, of a glamorous looking young couple. “Is that a front?”

“Yes and no.” Berounov sucks in his lower lip into his mouth, producing a smacking sound. “They're the owners of extensive property in Southern and Central Italy. They have a shipping company as well as shares in countless other ventures.”

“That's the 'no' part.” Merlin looks up. “What makes us interested in them?”

“They're part of a secret rogue organisation that wants to gain control of global organised crime,” Sarrumovitch says with a grimace of distaste. “They wouldn't be so dangerous if they weren't trying to lay their hands on a Hydrogen bomb.”

“They're trying to get their own nuclear warhead!” Merlin almost can't believe anybody would be so stupid as to try and meddle with a power like that. That governments did it, his own included, was bad enough, but for private citizens to resort to such dangerous armament seemed aberrant to him. “Are they actually in a position to get one?”

Berounov gives a sharp nod. “Yes, they are. With Nemeth as their prisoner they very well might.”

“And that's why you needed his daughter.” That's a simple deduction, really, Merlin wagers. “That's why I had to stop the Brit and get the girl first.” And he hasn't. That bloody MI6 spy bested him.

“Yes, so as to make contact with Nemeth senior.” Sarrumovitch takes the armchair Berounov left, and rabbits into it. “Or with his brother, Mithian's uncle, Trickler ‘Trick’ Nemeth. He's thrown his lot in with the Trollos and seems very happy to use his family as currency to get on with them.”

“I see.” Merlin's been long enough in the business to guess at the overall KGB plan. But he's lost
them the girl, so they have no means to get to the Trollos. They have no in to stop them. “Yet without Mithian...”

“There's a way around that,” says Berounov, giving Merlin a meaningful glance. “It will require some improvisation, but we can still make sure the Trollos don't get to build that bomb and use it.”

Merlin's sat through many government videos detailing the effects of the atom bomb on both the earth's soil and its human populations. In the political climate they live in, he couldn't have gone through school without such instruction really. What he's learned has put such fear of the things in him he won't likely ever discount any nuclear threat. To stop such a bomb from being deployed Merlin will use any ruse, every trick in the handbook. Because once one is used again, escalation will be inevitable. They'll all be done for and it won't make much difference whether they're Russian, or British, or American. The end will be round the corner. “What way?”

Merlin asks, wanting to probe Berounov's intentions.

“You'll learn that in due course.” Sarrumovitch stands with the abruptness of a springing coil. “We have an appointment tomorrow morning at ten o'clock by Schloss Bellevue in the Tiergarten, West Berlin.”

“Is it prudent?” Merlin asks, snapping the folder closed. “So soon after the Cuba crisis, should we not avoid making ourselves so visible in the West?”

“Just be there.” Sarrumovitch passes Merlin by as he gets to the door, which is still gaping uselessly open after Merlin's half dismantled it. “Or your mother will find herself on a train to Siberia.”

“Yes, sir.” Merlin salutes. “I'll be there, sir.”

Sarrumovitch and Berounov don't bother trying to close the door when they go.
123 Kurfurstendamm (52° 30' 14.00" N 13° 19' 53.00" E), Flat 32 A, West Berlin, Monday, 23rd November 1962, 3.00 AM

Arthur watches Mithian. She's lying in the middle of his bed, wearing one of Arthur's shirts open at the throat. Her hand lies laxly on the pillow and her mouth has part ed some. She's not snoring, but a soft sound does issue from her lips.

With a smile, he closes the door and walks into the adjoining room.

He makes it straight to the kitchen annex, opens a cupboard, and takes down a crystal glass. He pours wine into it. The label is smudged by time and dirt, and he can't read it, but it's a château-something-or-other and likely a good five decades old. His glass full, he walks to the closest armchair and sinks into it.

God, what a day. It was supposed to go smoothly. Enter East Berlin at the Friederich Strasse checkpoint, extract the girl, make it back to the West, wait for her to be packed onto a flight that will take her to the United Kingdom. Instead, the stubborn Russian tracked him, nearly messed his mission up, and made him sweat for it so much Arthur feels tired to the bone.

He groans, stretches, drinks a sip. Well, at least now that the mission's been accomplished he'll have some peace and quiet to look forward to. He's seen a wonderful ultra light spinning rod up in Dundee. It's practically shiny, with its waxy monofilament segment and large stripping guide. It calls to him in a way few pieces of equipment have ever done before. Back when he was flying through town, sensitive documents in his briefcase, he'd been unable to stop and nip into the shop. But now he can count on two weeks of freedom, he's going to take the Bentley out and drive all the way up to Scotland. He's going to get that rod, ask Alice if she can put him up.

Surely, they can find a cranny for him, one that has viable furniture and no sheets covering all surfaces. And once he has a place to stay, he'll give himself over to some leisure time, mostly to be taken up by angling.

The phone rings and Arthur picks up.

“Is the girl fine?” King asks without preamble.

“Yes.” Tired, quiet, watchful, but Arthur wagers that's because she's suddenly been thrust in a new environment and not because anything's the matter with her. He'd probably feel like that too if all he knew was life behind the iron curtain and he had to deal with a new world he didn't have the measure of. “She's fine.”

“Good.” King's voice sounds tinny. “We want her on her game.”

Arthur hasn't been told the specifics of the mission, but he'd never have dreamed to do anything other than make Mithian feel at home, make sure she's fine. As long as she's with him, it's his duty to look after her. “She's doing great, sir.”

“Perfect.”

“I'm going to escort her to Tempelhof tomorrow morning so she can be in London by lunchtime--”

“No,” Cenred says, his voice curt, to the point, brooking no objection. “The girl stays in Berlin and you too.”
“What!” Arthur hadn't brokered for this arrangement. He'd been promised something quite different. “I'm going home.”

“No, Pendragon, you're not.” Cenred must be tapping his fingers against the receiver because a dull sound wafts over. “Your mission is being extended.”

“Sir, I want to protect Queen and Country--” He'd never have pursued the career he has if he didn't think it his paramount duty. “But I've been at it too long. I'm tired and likely making mistakes.” He shouldn't have had such a hard time losing a Soviet spy. He nearly failed today. If the Russian on that roof hadn't chosen not to shoot, he would have died and lost Mithian into the bargain. An innocent. And that's... too painful to contemplate. Even so, he's got to review what happened, find out if he's getting rusty. “I won't be as efficient as--”

“Pendragon, you wouldn't want to get on my bad side, would you?” There's a lightness at the end of that question King surely doesn't mean. “You're a good agent. But that doesn't erase the information we have on your MP father. Information of such sensitive nature, it will ruin his career and undermine his reputation so fundamentally he won't be able to stick his nose out of his house.” King huffs a short bark of a laugh. “I think the old curmudgeon would scarcely be able to cope with that kind of shame.”

Arthur doesn't want to give in to King. He gets what he's doing and doesn't intend to buckle under the pressure. But he can easily picture his father in the throes of the indignities King is threatening to subject him to. And while he has no sympathy for what his father did, he can't let him sink without trying to help, without softening the blow somehow. The man's his father, for God's sake. “Exposing him won't be productive for you, King.”

“I'm of the opposite opinion.”

“I'll get him to stand down.” Arthur's been trying to find a way to persuade his father to do so for the longest time. At the moment that's impossible. Father equates an active life with being into politics. In the long run however, Arthur's sure he will. Father may be stubborn, but he's not an idiot, and he will just have to see that his schemes have mired him into a situation there's no backing out of short of resigning. “You won't gain anything by denouncing him other than stirring a political dust-up no one wants.”

“I don't care about politics, Pendragon,” King says. “I've no interest in who's in charge. I'm responsible for espionage.”

Arthur is aware he doesn't have the winning hand, nothing to leverage with. He wants to tell the man to fuck off, tell him that he's done, but that would be self-defeating in more ways than one. “Sir.”

“That's what I wanted to hear.” King's tone mellows out. “I've left a file for you. You'll find it in your bedroom. Study it.”

Arthur eyes his bedroom door. “What information will I find in it?”

“The useful kind.” King pauses, and it sounds as though he's distanced himself from the telephone. When he gets back on, he says, “Also, find yourself at Schloss Bellevue at ten tomorrow. We have an important meeting.”

No sooner has King finished the last word than he hangs up. Arthur stares at the receiver for a few long seconds before putting it back in its cradle.

His down-time soured, he undoes his tie and walks into his bedroom. It looks untouched. No
drawers gape open, the wardrobe stands shut, and no paper is out of place. His bed is as pristinely made as when he left it, with the top sheet curling away from the pillow. But on top of the blanket lies a mustard A4 envelope taped shut at the apex and on which the word 'Confidential' is stamped in big red letters.

After having pinched the bridge of his nose, Arthur sits on the edge of the bed, rips open the envelope, and spills the contents onto his lap. Paying no attention to the markings on the folder, he opens it. It's a personnel file. The photograph that stares at Arthur is that of the man who followed him tonight. It's a somewhat older picture with the person portrayed in it looking like a kid out of school, naivete written in the wide eyes that peek out from under an army cap. The document itself is written in Russian, but Arthur understands it fairly well. It's a record portion for one 'Merlin' Balinorovich Ambrosov, thirty, previously enrolled in the 15th army, 20th rifle corps, a decorated sharp shooter and possessor of two service medals.

“Mmm, a sharpshooter, too.” As he says the words Arthur rethinks the events of the night. “Pity that this clean record of yours seems to be tarnished.”

Ambrosov's file declares him to be a card carrying member of the Communist Party, but his personal notes deem him untrustworthy, someone with dubious leanings and therefore to be watched. Since the man has no demerits, Arthur can't understand why Merlin should have been so classified until he stumbles upon the bunch of handwritten notes that close the document. They say: 'Son of Balinor Nikolayevich Ambrosov, dissident general, anti-Soviet proselytiser'.

Arthur is memorising the name with a view to look it up, when there's a knock on his door.

Before Arthur's had time to say 'enter,' Mithian's poked her head in. She's still wearing Arthur's shirt and nothing else. “Can't sleep.”

“It's understandable.” Arthur closes the folder and slips it into the top bedside drawer. “You had a taxing experience.”

Mithian smiles. “A hella day.”

Arthur cocks his head and arches an eyebrow. “Strange expression for a Berlin girl.”

“We did manage to sneak in an American film or two,” Mithian says, lifting a shoulder. “As anti-socialist as that was.”

Arthur doesn't doubt Mithian is resourceful, that she would have found ways to entertain herself while defying the regime. “Well.” He stands up, brushes his trousers, and walks over to Mithian. “Let me make you some warm milk. Perhaps that'll help you sleep.”

Arthur's already in the living room, when Mithian says, “Arthur?”

He turns around. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.” Her lips frame themselves in a smile. “For getting me out.”

His face prickling with heat, Arthur draws himself to full height, squares his shoulders, his chin up. “I did nothing but my duty.”

Mithian looks at him softly and, since that gaze unmans him more than a little, Arthur turns around and starts searching the cupboards.
Merlin sits in the Trabant right next to Berounov. The car is black, small, nondescript. Its paintwork is flaky, rusty, rough to the touch. Inside, the car has been stripped of most of its gadgetry. There's no radio. A hole gapes open in place of the ashtray. Because the carpets are missing, Merlin's feet rest on a strip of chassis. But that's not anything unusual. Plenty of similar vehicles glide along the same avenue, stopping at the same street lights, emitting clouds of black smoke from their exhaust pipes. Ice frosts the streets, the flowerbeds that line certain thoroughfares, the gaps between pavement and street surface.

At the Invalidenstrasse crossing, a border guard stops them.

Berounov rolls the window down and barks, “What!”

“Nür BRD Bürger dürfen hier übertreten,” the guard tells them, though he does take pause at Berounov's use of Russian. “Sie müssen zurück nach dem Friederichstrasse übergang fahren und--”

“Young man.” Some spittle flies out of Berounov's mouth. “I don't care what you've been told. I don't care who may or may not ordinarily pass. Citizen, my arse! I'm from the Russian embassy and have a very special permit--” He lobbs his and Merlin's passport at the border guard. Bits and pieces fall out of Berounov's. “And if you don't want to end up charged with negligence and for this to be a dark blot on your career, you'll let us pass.”

The border guard opens the documents. When he sees the visa attached, the signatures on it, he blanches. He bends down, retrieves the flotsam that fell out of the passport and, standing straighter, hands the documents back. “I'm sorry, Comrade General. I--”

“Enough.” Berounov hands the papers to Merlin. “Just let us through. Quickly!”

The guard stands back, salutes, and gesticulates at one of his colleagues until the street barrier is lifted.

The day is cold and grey so the park is almost empty. Trees make for the sky, their branches extending outwards towards the path. They're in good trim though so access to the pathways is not barred. Gravel crunches under foot and flowers wilt among the grass growing in their patches. With its cream façade, Schloss Bellevue rises straight ahead of them and to the left the Spree flows.

Berounov leads Merlin towards its banks, where clusters of garden benches belonging to a closed café face each other.

Before they get there, they come a cross a duo of men. One of them is in his early forties, dark-haired, sleek looking, with a cunning air about him. The other is his companion's opposite, blond, strong of chest, honest-looking, fashionably attired, with a polished air about him that speaks of the kind of pedigree that goes back centuries.

When the duo gets within talking distance, the features of the blond man coalesce into a clear whole for Merlin. And then it becomes obvious. Merlin's seen him before, not this up close, of course, but they've already met. It's the British spy, the man from the other night, the one who bested Merlin by getting Nemeth out of East Berlin, the one who's endangering the world by laying his hands on the world's only hope against a nuclear winter.

The idea pricks him like a thorn and lights a profound sense of misgiving into Merlin. It also makes his thoughts spin in a thousand worrisome directions. The Brit's presence here can be no
coincidence, not in a city as big as this one, not when they're both spies. Which can only mean one thing.

Berounov has betrayed him. For whatever reason and in spite of how hard Merlin's tried to do his duty, Berounov has played him false. Maybe that's an easy out for the Russian state, ditching the son of a so-called dissident they think they can never really trust. Maybe they've struck a bargain with the West and are handing him over. Maybe it's some sort of spy game Berounov's concocted at the end of which Merlin ends up dead. Or perhaps the real defector is Berounov. Who knows? And there's no time to sort the truth out.

Danger presses on Merlin's spine like a hundred tonne slab. His blood starts racing in a fight or flight response. Except there's no escaping. The Brit's too close. With no time to plan his way out of this, there's no guarantee he can get out alive. Out of a wild impulse, Merlin extracts his Makarov from his shoulder holster and points it straight at the Brit.

The Brit is quick too. His shoulders go up and in a flash the muzzle of a Walter looks straight into Merlin's face. The Brit's index finger rests on the trigger with the lightness of a hummingbird's trembling wings.

In response, Merlin starts pulling too, with the lightest of pressures.

"Will you stop!" Berounov says, throwing his arms up. "For one we're in public. For another, you don't want to off your new partner, do you, Ambrosov?"

Sweat beading his forehead, Merlin mutters through his teeth. "You're lying."

"He's not lying," the Brit's companion says. "As of today we're working together."

Merlin doesn't believe that. They're playing him. This is a game rigged against him that ends with him as a corpse.

"What?" The Brit speaks the question in plummy tones, then tilts his head slightly towards his companion. "You're having me on, King!"

"Not at all, Pendragon." King looks at Merlin and then at his own colleague and smirks. "At least in this venture we're partnered with Ivan here."

Pendragon's eyes widen. Though he keeps Merlin in his sights, he tells his colleague, "You must be joking!"

"Not at all." King shrugs. "We're on a mission and, unfortunately, we need the help of our Russian... rivals here."

Merlin relaxes his grip on the trigger infinitesimally, not because he's not ready to shoot right next second, but because he really wants to see where this is going. Odds are this is still a trap and they're trying to lull him into a false sense of security, to make him believe that he's not in danger. They're likely hoping he will lower his weapon, so that they can kill him without risking their agent.

"That's absurd!" Pendragon is still bug-eyed, his mouth is drawn in a grimace of utter distaste. "We've never collaborated with the Soviets before! Well, not since the war ended."

"This time we are," King says, stepping aside so he's standing perpendicular to the rest of them. "I suggest you lower your gun, Pendragon, or we might never fulfil our objective."

Hands still gripping the gun, which is steadily pointed at Merlin, Pendragon raises an eyebrow. He
shifts his weight, sends a weighted glance King's way, then turns his head. Wrinkles deep on his forehead, he studies Merlin, his gaze fixed on him as if it can plumb Merlin from the inside out, fathom him.

Feeling all the weight of that gaze, its deconstruction of him, Merlin resettles his own weight, licks his lips. He doesn't put any pressure on the trigger, not even a phantom amount. But he doesn't release it either. Returning the favour, his scrutiny as meticulous as his counterpart's, he looks into Pendragon's eyes. They're cold, but clear, not shadowed at all. The man displays no facial tics, no tells. Even so, spies are known to be good at deceit and Pendragon may just be playing the part of the clueless agent.

“Ambrosov,” Berounov tells him. “Stand down.”

Merlin's shoulder's go up. “No.” The more Berounov speaks out in favour of Merlin's dropping his guard, the less Merlin believes in his innocence. “No.”

“Pendragon.” King rolls his eyes. “Do us a favour and put down your weapon. We aren't getting any younger here.”

Pendragon darts Merlin a glance, a keen, weighted one. His mouth tilts in a smirk, one completely unlike his boss'. Bypassing the latter, he tells Merlin, “How about doing it at the same time?”

If only Merlin could trust these people, he would. “What if I do and your colleague shoots me?” Or Berounov does. “That would be very stupid of me.”

“True.” Pendragon inclines his head. It's a short-range movement, one that doesn't affect his overall balance or cause him to shift his aim. “On the other hand if he meant to, King could already have put a bullet in you. You know, while you were so busy watching me for any move.” He pauses as if for emphasis. “Or a sniper could have taken you down.”

“No.” Merlin doesn't take his eyes off Pendragon. That would be naïve and a big mistake. “Line of sight is broken up by the trees and there's no roof or hiding spot suitable for a sniper. Unless you think one could have climbed the Presidential Palace.”

“Touché.” Pendragon smiles and it looks incredibly genuine. “But then again you're the expert.”

Merlin freezes. It starts low down his spine and climbs steadily upwards. “You read my file.”

“Your people--” King gesticulates at Berounov. “--were so kind as to give it to us.”

His heartbeat spiking, Merlin cons Berounov from the corner of his eyes. So, it's just as he suspected. Berounov's sold him to the enemy. He's a step away from pointing his gun at Berounov himself, when King says, “Naturally, we'll give you Pendragon's file too.”

“What!” Pendragon says, stabbing King with a venomous side glance.

“You don't want him--” King slices the air with his hand. It points at Merlin, palm spread wide. “--to shoot you at point blank range, do you?”

Pendragon compresses his lips, breathes so hard the noise from his exhalation carries. Then his shoulders slump a notch. To Merlin he says, “You'll have to trust I won't shoot you.”

Merlin is almost more likely to trust Pendragon not to shoot than Berounov. And that's all it takes, isn't it? All he has to do. He needs to believe that Pendragon won't kill him on the spot. He supposes this is a leap of faith. “Right. At my three.”
After having simultaneously lowered their weapons, they flip the safety of their guns on. The threat of a shoot-out put aside for the moment, they find places at an empty table overlooking the river. The view has a starkness, a winter spareness, about it that reminds Merlin of home. The air is crisp with cold, the sky slate grey and laden with clouds. The Spree's waters are foamy, grey, moving at a deep churn. Beaks dipping into the water for prey, birds skim the surface. Then, wings flapping, they take off.

“Ambrosov,” Berounov says, crossing his leg over his knee, “tell your counterpart about the Nemeth girl.”

“Mithian?” Pendragon asks.

“She's the daughter of a physicist with the skills to build a home-made atom bomb,” Merlin says, liking the scenario he's presenting even less than his current predicament. “A scientist who's in the hands of a duo of Italian criminals vying for world domination.”

Pendragon's eyebrow twitches upwards.

At that Merlin relays all he knows about the Trollos, tells Pendragon about their lifestyle, assets, and about the current ace in their hands. As Merlin speaks, Pendragon's face goes through a variety of changes. With his brow lined and his eyes set on goggling, at first his expression verges on the surprised, but then it settles. His eyes narrow, his mouth closes, and he smiles subtly to himself, as if he's wrested all of this raw data and has it under control.

When Merlin's done speaking, King says, “The problem, as you can probably both see, requires attention. Our joint efforts.”

“Joint efforts?” Merlin repeats the words as if that's key to unlocking their meaning.

King sprawls onto his bench. “We're facing a serious nuclear threat. Letting the Trollos have their way serves no one's interest. Given that our governments have decided to...” King seeks Berounov's gaze. “How would you define it, comrade?”

At that Berounov scowls, but says, “Combine our efforts.”

“Do you mean to say our countries are making peace with each other?” Pendragon asks, eyes brightening. “That the cold war is over?”

“I wouldn't go as far as to say that.” Berounov fiddles with the partially undone knot of his tie. “But this time – in this very special set of circumstances – we are to join forces.”

“And this order comes from where exactly?” Merlin no longer thinks Berounov has organised this meeting to have him killed. But he still isn't sure he can trust him entirely. Or a little. “That's something I'd really like to know.”

“The highest echelons of our countries' governments.” Berounov shares a look with King. There's reserve in it but also some kind of basic level understanding. “Be at ease on that score.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Pendragon indicates himself and Merlin. “Share information? Give each other pointers in case one of us in a position to stop the Trollos for good?”

“No.” King laughs a throaty laugh, then slaps his hand on Pendragon's shoulder. “For the time being you two must consider each other partners. As of today you're on a mission to stop the Trollos.”

King takes a breather to let that sink in. “Together.”
“Together!” Merlin says at the same time Pendragon does.

They both seek their superiors' gazes.

“Indeed,” says Berounov, offering zero reprieve on this.

King thumbs his upper lip. “With Mithian Nemeth in tow, of course.”

“Sir, I must object,” Pendragon starts, giving Merlin a once over that's none too flattering. “I work much better alone.”

Merlin isn't slow to copy him. “Comrade general, we both know this won't do. We'd be unwillingly revealing trade secrets to each other all the time.”

“Try not to,” says King.

Pendragon says, “Besides we can't collaborate with the Russians. Their tech is sub-par.”

Sub-par, my arse. Merlin knows for a fact Russian scientists are just as good as the allied Powers' ones. They just have the Soviet government breathing on their necks the same way Merlin does.

“See, see, we can't work together.” Merlin doesn't even think this needs stating. “The Brit is uncooperative and frankly sounds too full of himself.”

“Too full of himself.” Pendragon stops addressing his superior to look daggers at Merlin. “Too full of myself, am I?” A change comes over his face. He reddens; his lips blanch from being compressed too hard. And his eyes go small, losing their amused slant. “That's really rich coming from a trigger-happy politburo sniper. How much pride in one's own personal omnipotence does it take to kill that many people in such an underhanded manner?”

And to think that Merlin could have killed Pendragon, that he could have aimed and taken his life, so that they wouldn't be having this conversation now. Instead his morals are being doubted. And while his record is not exactly squeaky clean – he's a KGB operative – he's always clung to his notions of human decency.

The chair he's sitting on falling backwards rail first, Merlin stands. “Yes, that's what I said and I stand by it, you posh, arrogant Sanduhrst reject. You think the world's to be handed to you on a silver platter simply because of your birth, because your mummy – or perhaps it was your daddy – exercised just enough pressure--”

“Actually, I'm an alumnus of the Royal Naval College--” When Pendragon takes in the end of Merlin's tirade, he stiffens, and his eyes take on shadows that weren't there before. “How dare you implicate my father in anything untoward!”

“Because that's what rich people in the West do--” Merlin's laying it on thick. He doesn't wholly subscribe to the belief that all Westerners are capitalist pigs who rely on inheritance to make their way in the world, but Pendragon really is rubbing him the wrong way. “Isn't it?”

“Oh course, you think that. Fed on propaganda as you are.” Pendragon scoffs. “Of course you're prejudiced against our way of life because you don't even know it!”

“I do know enough.” Merlin's studied the Westerners and his knowledge is not only the filtered claptrap you get in Moscow. It's first-hand too. While he understands that goodness is to be found in every nook of the world, he's also learnt that they're as morally lax in London and Washington as they are in Moscow. At the moment he'd rather dwell on that than on Westerners' innate probity, fancy that. “Thank you very much.”
“Is that what you think, you uncouth--”

“Enough!” Berounov hits the metal table with the flat of his hand. “I've had enough, you'll stop arguing and start obeying orders.”

“I agree,” King says, putting a hand up. “This is leading nowhere and frankly unpleasant to witness. Do your duties or expect to suffer the consequences.”

Both Merlin and Pendragon flounder back into silence.

“Your mission is to infiltrate the Trollo's network and save Dr Nemeth.” Berounov sounds quite chirpy now that that Merlin and Arthur have stopped butting heads and they're back on track.

His legs feeling hollow, Merlin sits back down. “The mission of course.”

“I will my utmost best to accomplish it, naturally,” Pendragon tells King.

King says, “You do understand that getting Nemeth back won't be enough?”

Merlin had already figured that out. “Yes.”

As for Pendragon, he nods slowly, thoughtfully, his face furrowed by heavy lines that sit quite ill on his confidently handsome face.

“You will have to get back his research too so it can't be replicated.” King extracts a computer disc from his pocket. It's fat, round, with a hollow in the centre which harbours a magnetic drum. “I don't need to tell you that whichever country owns the data wins the armaments race.”

Merlin thinks of the implications and they're quite chilling. He's basically been thrown into this with a partner he can't trust and he will have to compete with. And if he loses out to him, the Western Powers will obliterate his country. And in spite of how tired he is of Soviet politicians, he wants to protect his fellow countrymen, the common people, the soldiers and the workers and the farmers, people like his mother, with their plot of land and humble houses.

Not knowing what's going on in Merlin's head, Berounov takes his cue from King. “You'll decide how to go about it, of course. The planning is up to you. But we thought we'd give you a pointer or two.”

“Beware of Caterina,” King says. “She's the real prime mover behind all this.”

“Use her husband however you see fit.” Berounov almost mutters that to himself. “He's very devoted, worships the ground she walks on, but he's also a fool. That can be played upon.”

“Nemeth's uncle cannot to be trusted.

“And now that you've been warned--” Berounov climbs to his feet. “--We can leave you two to arrange the details of your plan of action.”

When Berounov and King have gone Pendragon says, “I still don't like you.”

The words are expected. Merlin doesn't feel dissimilarly either. Pendragon represents everything that Merlin thinks little of, but the dismissive tone in which they carry over to him has a sting to it that makes him be petty and say, “Well, neither do I.”
A new clutch slung over her shoulder, Mithian crosses the café floor. She files under the tear drop chandelier and brushes past a waiter in a white single-breasted coat. Depositing her bag on the free chair to her right, she sinks into the one opposite Arthur's.

“I hope you had an enjoyable day,” Arthur says, folding the newspaper he had been reading. He has a love hate relationship with broadsheets anyway. They keep you up to date but what they leave out of what's going on in the world is more than what they keep in. Arthur would know. The secrets that never see that light of day and yet animate world's politics are endless. Sticking to the sports page is all around better. “Everything went well?”

“Oh, yes, I dutifully finished all my shopping.” As Mithian talks, her hair shifts over her shoulders. “I now look like a British girl who daily graces Bond Street. You should see my new outfits. Very Mary Quant.”

“Good.” Arthur is only superficially interested in ladies' fashion. He knows how to dress to impress himself. It's part of his job. Most of the time sartorial choices can distract from his true role and objective. But looking at photo editorials is not exactly his thing. “You'll fit in in Rome.”

“I owe you some two thousand marks.” Mithian opens the menu. “I didn't use up all the money you gave me.”

“It's not necessary.” Arthur mirrors Mithian though he's not particularly hungry. “It's government money.”

“Still--”

“Look, mission money is mission money.” explaining this to civilians is pretty hard. They look at the money and gadgetry and they can't wrap their heads around them, can't see them as the tools they are. “The state can spare it and mo--”

His expatriation on the subject is interrupted by the appearance of Merlin at the café's entrance. He's talking to the Maître D', who standing behind a solid wooden ledger, his back stiff in smooth blacks. Merlin himself looks quite... dapper. His hair's had a trim and he's wearing more fashionable clothes than on previous occasions. It's not exactly the type of garment that's changed, however. He's still sticking to a rather unimaginative combo of black trousers and a crew neck, nothing that can vie with the beauty of a Savile Row suit, but the cut of them is of a decidedly different quality, body-hugging and modelled to suit his wide shoulders and narrow hips. Made to fit, finely tailored, matching standards that'll make him pass as a Westerner in this part of Berlin. Arthur hadn't really thought Merlin had it in him.

“Ah,” Arthur says, lowering his gaze when Merlin makes it past the Maître D. He addresses Mithian again. “I forgot to tell you about it. We are collaborating with the Russians.”

“The Russians?” Mithian quirks an eyebrow. Her voice doesn't falter or crack, but it's pitched in the way of tonelessness and that doesn't sound particularly natural. “Aren't they what I'm fleeing from?”

Arthur had been expecting exactly such a question and has an answer at the ready. It's pretty stock as far as they go, but he'll make sure Mithian won't run any risk. “Russians are our allies for the time
“I see.” Mithian puts a hand under her chin and leans closer. “Is this prudent?”

Arthur has no idea. It'll complicate matters, surely enough. But it's what they've got to work from. “This mission is somewhat special.” Mithian knows what the objective is, how much it matters. “We need all the help we can get.”

“You did get me out of the East, Arthur.” Mithian holds his gaze. “So I'm going to trust you.”

Arthur can feel all the weight of responsibility that that phrase pins on him but he can't say anything to reassure Mithian because Merlin's joined them.

“Pendragon,” he says, making a sign for Arthur to remain seated. He offers Mithian his hand to shake. “Miss Nemeth.”

Mithian gives Merlin the same kind of once over Arthur's already afforded him and smiles. “So you're our man from--”

“Yes.” Merlin shifts his weight from one foot to the other with an awkward motion. “Yes, I am.”

“I see.” Mithian angles her body at him. “That's interesting.”

A waiter comes round. Arthur orders tea with milk and no sugar. The skin around his eyes crinkling at the corners, Merlin looks up from the menu and mimes the word “Cliché”. He goes for black coffee himself, with a side of cream, not an Americano. Mithian asks for cake and croissants and hot chocolate. “I'm in the West,” she says, extending an arm over the back of her chair. “I'd better indulge while I can.”

Once they've been served and the waiter has gone, Arthur cradles his own tea cup and says, “So, we have to come upon an action plan we all agree on.”

Mithian nods while Merlin stops fumbling with his sugar sachets.

“We must make contact with Mithian's uncle,” Arthur continues when he's sure he's got the duo's unabated attention. “But first we must get friendly with the Trollos.”

“I'm sure I can get us a meeting with my uncle.” Mithian puts down the fork she'd picked up. “But I wouldn't know how to get close to his bosses.”

“That's not going to be so hard as you think,” Arthur says, taking a sip of his tea, which is not as good as he'd hoped but is at least suitably warm. “I have devised a way.”

Merlin pushes aside his own mug. “Hear, hear.”

“The Trollos have extensive property in Southern Italy.” Worrying about finding the right way to tackle the couple, Arthur spent the night studying their file. Well into the small hours, he was at it. At first he'd been afraid there would be no way to get close to them without giving rise to suspicion and eventually blowing their cover. But by the time the sun took to shining over Berlin, Arthur had developed a plan. “I'm going to pose as a potential buyer, an upper class British expat looking into acquiring some plum bit of real estate, some villa or other, stocked up to the ceiling with works of art.”

“So you'd be basically playing yourself,” Merlin says, arching an eyebrow.
Arthur scowls.

“What?” Merlin bites off his laughter, shakes his head. “I'm all for it. At least this way you'll stay in character.”

“I'll have you know I can play whichever role to utmost perfection.” Arthur speaks three languages, can pull off many an accent, and is a master of disguise. “And you really know nothing about me--” Arthur may really be the scion of an old family. His oldest traced ancestor served under John of Gaunt and the family name itself seems to go back to legendary King Arthur's time. But that doesn't mean that it's all that he is, or that that's all the experience he has had. The Navy knocked all self-importance out of him early enough in his life. “So I hope you'll refrain from passing any comment on--”

Mithian clears her throat. “Boys, I thought we were coming up with a plan?”

“Right, yes, right.” How could Arthur forget himself. It's vital he keep his mind on the problem at hand. His not doing so would have the worst of consequences. He must do better. “I'll play the part of the dandy and enter their good graces.” He levels a glance at Mithian. “Mithian is going to be my wife...”

“No,” Merlin says, before Arthur can go into detail about his plan. “No, I just don't think it's a good idea.”

“May I ask why?” Arthur doesn't want to raise another stink, but he doesn't mean to take this lying down either. “You must have a reason for vetoing my proposition.”


“What?” Arthur is afraid he follows and he can't stop his face from heating. “Have it all out.”

“Mithian is beautiful.” Merlin acknowledges her with a nod. “I think you'd spend your time trying to make an impression on her rather than focusing on the case.”

Mithian says, “I have no intention of letting my head be turned.”

Merlin meets her eyes. “I don't doubt you.” He nods at Arthur. “You on the other hand...”

Arthur doesn't know whether he should stand and punch Merlin or stay put and speak calmly. He can do neither because his face goes hot to the bone and his heart strangles itself to a stop. How could Merlin be more off-track? “I-- I never would.” The words come out choked, low. It takes a few long moments for his tone to grow more measured, matter of fact. “What other solution do you suggest?”

“I could pose as her fiancé,” Merlin says, smiling Mithian's way. “That would work.”

“And pray why?” Arthur cocks an eyebrow. “What's the difference between you and me? Why would I, as you say, get distracted, while you wouldn't?”

Mouth pursed, Merlin looks away. “I'm Russian.”

“And therefore incapable of harbouring a crush?” Merlin is really trying to have Arthur on. “Is that what you're trying to say?”

“Boys,” Mithian says with a sigh. “I think this is really neither the time nor the place to--”
“No.” Merlin looks at Arthur, his face drawn into tight lines, cutaway angles. “I do harbour crushes, I do feel sexual attraction.”

Arthur shifts in his seat, feels the dampness on his neck and hands, but still makes a point to make a ‘got you face’. “So there's no difference.”

“There is,” Merlin says, only briefly looking at the counter top before lifting his gaze to match Arthur's. Even so his eyes are unreadable, the expression in them alert, watchful but ultimately undecipherable. “I've got my eyes on the prize, saving the world.”

“And I don't?” Arthur can't believe Merlin is questioning his readiness to do that. “I--”

Mithian places her hand on Arthur's arm. “Arthur, Merlin's right.” She turns to Merlin. “Not because of the silly reason he named, but because of who we are.”

“Pardon?” Arthur's eyes widen a fraction. Mithian can't think him as shallow as Merlin unfortunately does. She can't be as wrong as he is. He'd hoped she'd be intuitive enough to get it. “I don't understand.”

“It wasn't exactly silly,” Merlin says, looking away.

Mithian spares them a long suffering glance and continues, “Arthur, you're British. My uncle knows where I'm from. The Trollos will too. Wouldn't they think it strange if I'd found myself a British boyfriend?”

Put it like that, Arthur can see how his plan has some holes. “If you play my wife, I can keep a close eye on you, take better care of you.”

“I know you mean well.” She rubs her hand over his. “But Merlin makes much more sense as my fiancé. He's Russian. I could have easily met him in East Berlin.”

Arthur still likes his own arrangements better. “We could say we met after you--” He makes air quotes. “--left East Berlin.”

“It makes little sense, Arthur,” Mithian says. “I wouldn't be introducing a man I've just met to my uncle, would I?”

“I'll be happy to be Mithian's fiancé.” Merlin flashes Mithian a gentle smile and Arthur a challenging glance. “So what's the story?”

Mithian picks up on that with ease. “You could be an architect whom I met while visiting some kind of monument or other.”

“Nah.” Merlin shakes his head. “I know nothing about architecture and have no time to learn if we're to move on soon.”

“So what are you going to be?” Arthur folds his arms across his chest, which he makes stick out as far as he's able. “A Russian rubbish collector on holiday in East Berlin? Nikita Khrushchev's personal chauffeur out and about on a sabbatical?”

“There's pride in every job.” Merlin sticks his jaw out and pushes his lips together. “But, no, that's not it, though you were just being funny.” He rolls his eyes. “Or so you thought.” I was thinking photographer.”

“Well, that's interesting,” Mithian says.
“I can’t discuss architecture but I can take photos.” Merlin shrugs his shoulders, sticks his lips out.

Arthur’s gaze snags on the bow of Merlin’s lips. It’s because his pout is ridiculous, though on others it would probably look graceful, aesthetically pleasing. If it wasn’t for the manifestation of Merlin’s peevishness in fact, there’d be enough there to look at there. Shaking himself, he says, “Surveillance photos aren’t art.”

Lines dig deep into Merlin’s forehead. “I can still use a Leika pretty much satisfactorily.”

“Yes, I’m sure a Russian bloke taking photos in Rome will go down well with the authorities,” Arthur says, gleefully imagining all the mishaps that could give rise to. “And not endanger our plan at all.”

“I’ll have all my fake papers with me, listing my profession.” Merlin sucks on his lower lip. “Nobody will be able to say anything.”

“Still, you’ll go on a suspect list as soon as you take out your camera.” Merlin may not know how these things work in NATO countries, but Arthur does. “And where would we be then?”

“It won’t matter,” Merlin says, his mouth quirking sideways. “Or is your side lying when they say we’re in this together?”

“Oh now you’re coming for the West again.” Arthur knows the world of Western intelligence is a world of schemers and double crossers. They are twisting his arm too, after all, and Arthur can’t call that upright or honest. But he can’t think anyone would be stupid enough to be planning a volte face where atom bombs are concerned. “Your idea is--”

“Perfect.” Mithian nods at Merlin. “Now we’ll just have to invent a back-story for us. Where did I meet you?”

As Merlin and Mithian concoct a plausible story, Arthur finishes his tea. It’s cold by now but the sipping gives him something to do, which the other two are clearly not. He looks away, starts toying with the candle holder ornamenting the centre table, picks up the menu again, then puts it down again. It’s not exactly an enthralling read.

When Mithian and Merlin are done making up scenarios for their idyllic fake pasts together, Mithian suggests getting the bill, and Merlin and Arthur take to arguing about who’ll foot it.

“It makes sense if I do,” Arthur says, taking out his wallet. “I’ve just got cash for the mission.”

“Same here,” Merlin says. “I can cover it.”

“It doesn’t seem fair.” Arthur doesn’t even glance at the receipt, but starts counting out banknotes. “I’m simply not sure the Russian government can be that fair.”

“Prejudice talking,” Merlin says, crumpling up a wad of Deutschmarks. “I can assure you our government doesn’t think like that. I never lack for anything on missions.”

“One wonders what happens when you’re not one one.” Arthur’s sure Merlin starves in between assignments.

Merlin goes red in the face. “I assure you I don’t need any charity. In fact, I do well enough and am even able to send money to my mother from time to time.”

That gels with Arthur’s idea of a Soviet spy’s life. They can barely scrape by. “I insist. I--”
“You're patronising me now.”

“I'm not doing any such thing.” If this is what Arthur gets for being understanding, for offering an olive branch, then Arthur doesn't know. He's beginning to think that kindness will never appease Merlin. “But if you're determined to see it that way, then go ahead and pay up.”

“Oh so now it's all on me!”

Mithian waves her hand at the waiter. While Arthur is busy explaining to Merlin while he's being incoherent, she places money in the server's hand. By the time Arthur can do something about it, the waiter's been tipped and has wandered off to other tables.

“That'll teach you two,” she says, gathering up her things.

Arthur can see her point.
The Test

The last rays of the sun paint the streets of Rome a yolky yellow. Cream façades dot wide boulevards and short interconnecting streets; green and brown shutters stand open, flowers blooming in pots framed along the length of window sills. In between every day buildings marble domes shine, breaking up the vista with offshoots of columns and porticoes. Red brick walls crumbling with the dust of age rise in the corners of squares.

Winding up a narrow street lined with boutiques, the taxi slows down before the revolving doors of their hotel.

Though his instinct is to step out and reconnoitre, Merlin waits for the bellboy to open the car door. Mithian ducks out in his wake. She threads her arm under his, her grip tight, and pressures him to a halt with a movement of her wrist. Head up, she studies her surroundings, taking them in with her eyes narrowed and her muscles locked. When she relaxes, she murmurs in Merlin's ear. “Let's go.”

Treading on a soft Turkish carpet, they make for the reception desk. On his way there, Merlin cons his surroundings. A lady with a lapdog shashays in the direction opposite the one Mithian and Merlin are moving in. She's heavily bejewelled and even the dog sports gems in his collar. Merlin snorts and looks to the side. At a table a young couple studies a map, following the tracery of dotted lines and wide circles with the tips of their fingers. Occupying the table opposite theirs are two men; one burly and with a buzz cut, gnarled fingers pawing at a yellowed copy of the Iliad, the other big nosed and with a suit that ill fits his frame. It stretches too thin at the elbows and doesn't button at the waist. As they sit, they face opposite directions, untouched drinks resting on the table between them.

Merlin meets the gaze of the would be reader, but soon drops it.

The reception counter is wide and marble topped, shining against the soft lights that brighten the lobby. The receptionist greets them with a measured, polite smile, and hands them the key to their room. It's on the fourth floor, she says, and she hopes it will be to their liking. Mithian smiles in response, takes his hand, twining their fingers, and whispers in his ear. Merlin grins, looks down, thanks the receptionist and shepherds Mithian towards the ample flight of stairs.

Damask covers the walls of their room, heavy golden threads weaving together as they vie for the ceiling. Two wide beds with a teal upholstered headboard camp centre stage, facing a massive oak wardrobe with doors etched in flower work.

Sinking into one of the armchairs, a silk-topped, wide-cushioned imperial wide-seater, Mithian stretches her legs and says, “You can't say they didn't splurge.”

Merlin makes for the bathroom, opens the tap and then slinks back into the main room. With a sigh he goes to the wardrobe, opening its doors wide and tapping the interior partitions with his knuckles. “Oh, yes, they did.”

“Merlin?” Mithian says. “What are you doing?”

“Unpacking?” Mithian sounds incredulous, narrows her eyes at him, then sinks into silence. When she speaks again it's a tonally different way. “Make sure to fold your shirts well, or they'll crease.”

“Yeah.” Merlin says, knocking against the wardrobe's bottom shelf. “Will do.”
Mithian breathes hard. “Are you finished in there?”

Merlin finds a bug under the bottom panel and one stuck to the side of the shoe compartment. He finds another handful under the rug. When he's got them all, he crushes them under his shoes. “Got them all yeah.”

“All? As many as that?” When Mithian moves, the springs in the armchair, sure to be an antique, creak. “Who do you think put them there?”

Merlin considers the detritus he has underfoot. “It could have been the Trollos. Or Arthur Pendragon.”

“Are you you really so ready to suspect him?” Mithian says. “Aren't we supposed to be in this together?”

“Trust doesn't come easy when one's on the job.” Merlin has found that out to his cost. “Besides, I'll be bugging him too so I don't see why he shouldn't have followed the same train of thought.”

“And if it's the Trollos?” Mithian's face gets lined with concern.

“If it's them,” Merlin says, thinking of the immediate future, “then they're already one step ahead of the game.”

“Even if they are.” Mithian straightens her spine; her face getting sharper, more angled. “I will get my father back.”

“I understand.” Merlin probably gets the emotional turmoil Mithian's experiencing better than a lot of people. If he were her, he'd probably say exactly the same things. “I'll help you get him back.”

Mithian sighs. “Because it will help you get the bomb.”

“Yes.” They both know that's the objective. “But I want to help you too.”

A smile unfurls on Mithian's face. “Thank you, Merlin.”

Once they've unpacked, they take an evening stroll along the Via Condotti. It's the go-to place to see and be seen and allowing the Trollos to know they're in Rome is part of their game. It's late enough that street lights flicker on and rolling shutters come down. Pressing on Mithian's hand, Merlin slows down and stops at a jeweller's window. In it he sees a man's reflection, a rugged face, close cropped hair. Merlin dips his gaze, then lifts it again. By the time he has, his shadow's no longer in place.

When she squeezes his hand, Mithian's fake engagement ring digs into his skin.

Merlin's thinking about something reassuring to say, when he notices the man hiding behind a postcard rack. He's wearing a jacket made of light-spun fabric, sock-less loafers and, in spite of the lateness of the hour, sunglasses. “Let's check out that souvenir shop.”

Merlin picks a few cards from the rack. They're glossy and burst with colours, presenting vistas of Rome and busty pin-ups. “You know.” Merlin attempts to move his mouth as little as he can while he speaks. “I think the shades are overkill.”

“Shut up, Merlin,” Pendragon hisses, as he too feigns interest in the cards. “You're being followed.”

“I know.” Merlin can feel the presence of his shadows even if he can't see them. “Two men. One burly, the other short-haired.”
“Yes.” Arthur takes three cards from the rack. “They're from the Trollos.”


Arthur looks down at the cards he's holding, takes in the images they bear, blushes and puts them back in place. Wearing a pout, he says, “You know you can't react, don't you?”

Arthur really must have taken him for a newbie, Merlin reflects. “I know. I can't give away I'm KGB.”

“They mustn't suspect at all, which means you'll have to take it.”

“I know.” Merlin's in for a punch or two in the gut. He understands. “I can do that.”

Arthur takes off his sunglasses. “It's dangerous. I want you to watch out.”

A lot of this is out of Merlin's hands, but he can look after himself, make sure he appears vulnerable while he doesn't let himself open to any true weakness. “What, are you worried about me?” A smile tugs on his lips. “That's very touching, Arthur, very touching.”

Arthur draws himself to his full height. “I'm merely worrying about Mithian.”

“I won't let anything happen to her.” If she's threatened, he'll drop his cover. “You can be sure of that.”

“Still.” Arthur makes a grab for his sleeve. “Be prudent, all right, Merlin?”

Merlin nods but doesn't reply. He streams back into the traffic, Mithian by his side. From Via Condotti they move eastwards towards the Tiber. They make a show of stopping here and there to see the sights, to look at a shop window, to hold hands. Merlin takes photographs of Mithian. She smiles for him and strikes suitable poses that give off an Eastern-Block-girl-seeing-the-world-for-the-first-time vibe. Merlin has no idea if that just oozes naturally off of her or if she's playing the part they gave her to play. Either way it's brilliant and Merlin keeps it up for as long as it seems reasonable. He bets all this dilly-dallying in a very public place his making his tails nervous.

When they're done, Merlin straps his camera around his neck and leads Mithian down the steps that will take them to the river path.

“Watch out,” he tells Mithian under his breath. Louder he says, “Look at this. I thought we should get a closer view.”

Gulls swoop in from the sky while the river waters ribbon on. The sound of their bubbling isn't enough to cover the footfall. Merlin doesn't turn around but from the corner of his eyes he can spy his two shadows descending the stairs.

When one of the men, the burly one with a shoulder to waist ratio of two to one touches his shoulder, Merlin puts a polite smile on his face and says, “How can I help you?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me the time,” the man says.

Merlin makes a show of looking at his watch; he flashes it. “It's five to nine.”

“Look at that watch.” The burly man whistles. “I bet it can tell the time pretty well.”

“Actually, no.” Merlin's watch is decent enough. Not that these men care or that he does. But he must appear clueless. “It's a minute or so behind but--”
“Give it to us,” says the man with the close crop. “We'll sort it out ourselves.”

Merlin takes a step back. “Well, no, I--”

The burly man takes out his knife, makes sure to make it glint in the moonlight.

“Merlin,” Mithian says from behind him. “Merlin, please.”

Merlin affects some trembling of the hand. “W-what do you mean?”

Close crop closes in on him. “If you want to live, give us everything you've got on you.”

Making sure he doesn't slip on the wet embankment, Merlin steps backwards. “I've got nothing on me.”

“Liar,” the burly man tells him with a sneer. “Empty your pockets or we'll think you don't want to share.”

Merlin's probably put up enough of a defensive act. “Okay, all right, all right. Just don't hurt us.”

With hands he makes as unsteady as possible, Merlin hands over his wallet, key-chain, wristwatch and tie pin. The whole of it is worth no more more than thirty-thousand lire, a trifle really, but that's not the point of this exercise, Merlin knows well. When Mithian is told to hand over her valuables, Merlin makes a token protest. He gets a punch in the gut for his pains. It hurts somewhat, especially where his tissues are softer, at the confluence between his ribs and belly, but not so much that he's out of it with pain. He goes to his knees all the same. They'd better believe he's some kind of delicate flower after this. Head ducked, hands curling on sandy gravel, he pants as though he's trying to get his breath back. As he does, he sees a blur of something at the periphery of his vision. Without moving too much, he cranes his neck just a little and his visuals clear. Up on the bridge stands Arthur Pendragon, one hand splayed on the rail, the other reaching behind the folds of his jacket.

A glint of metal tells Merlin what Arthur's preparing to do.

Merlin can predict how this will go down. Arthur will fire and off Merlin's robbers. The Trollos will go looking for their goons and fail to trace them, thus understanding that Mithian Nemeth's fiancé is not who he says he is. Their plan will crumble. To stop that from happening Merlin must get through to Arthur, make him see that they've got a chance here if they play their cards well. Merlin shakes his head. It's subtle. He hopes Arthur sees it.

He may have for Arthur drops his hand.

In a flash of jewellery Mithian's possession go into the ruffians' pockets. When all pieces have disappeared, the burly man says, “And that ring on your finger.”

“It's my engagement ring.” Mithian stands up taller.

“We'll still have it,” the burly man says, waggling his fingers at her. “Or would you prefer to be fed to the fish?”

“You're vile.” Mithian slips her ring off her finger. It's not a large stone but it's a pretty one, cut so it catches the light at all times. “There. Are you satisfied now?”

“No.” Close Crop eyes Merlin as he straightens. “I'll have that nice camera too.”

Merlin's balls his hands into white-knuckled tightness. “No.”
The burly man plants a fist into Merlin's stomach and an uppercut on his cheek. These blows are fairly vicious, grating off bone and burying themselves into soft flesh, and Merlin goes down again. His knees haven't even hit the ground, when the burly man follows through with a straight downward chop that puts fire in Merlin's spine.

"Your camera."

Merlin coughs, spits. "No."

"Merlin," Mithian says, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Please."

"No." Merlin wraps his fingers around the camera strap. He's replaced them, so they're new, but he still remembers the frayed feel of the originals, their smoothness where they thinned the most because of constant use. "No. I'm not giving it to them."

Alarm echoes in the sharp tones of Mithian's voice as she says, "Merlin."

The burly man grabs Merlin by the hair and tilts his head back. Flashing a knife in his face, he says, "I'd really love to use this but I can make an exception if you give me that pretty camera of yours."

The weight of it is – has always been – a comfort to Merlin. He knows the ins and outs of its viewfinder, the shortcomings of its lenses and, the quirks of its exposure control. He's always thought of it as something more than a mere object, as something with an aura of its own. He knows it's stupid, that his feeling has no scientific basis, but cherishing has little to do with fact. Parting with it would be like severing a part of him, a limb, or a bone. He can sense the pain of it deep in his marrow. On the other hand he can tell what will happen if he doesn't give in. He'll have to either put up a defence and blow his cover or get a knife in the gut. Which, frankly, would overall defeat his purpose.

"Merlin, give the man your camera," Mithian says.

Wincing against the grip on his hair, Merlin exhales, nostrils a-flare. Out of the corner of his eye he catches sight of Arthur. He's in the stairway's shadow, looking like his own mass has been subsumed by the darkness. He moves his head in what Merlin takes to be a nod, a gesture of encouragement.

Muscles releasing, Merlin unknots the camera strap and passes the object over to the burly man.

"Wise choice." The burly man slings the Leika around his own neck. "Wise choice."

As a parting gift Merlin gets a kick to the side that sends his kidneys holidaying in the vicinity of his lungs and leaves him starving for breath.

Massaging his back, Mithian kneels at his side. "Are you all right?"

"I felt better before." Merlin breathes in and out of his mouth twice. "But I'm okay."

"Can you stand?" Mithian asks.

Before Merlin can answer, Arthur materialises before them. He hauls Merlin to his feet, prods his ribs and cradles his face to check for damage. Merlin rolls his eyes but is currently not dead set against someone establishing whether he has any broken bones.

While he checks that Merlin's fine, Arthur's wears a frown. The more Arthur touches him, the more his fingers dig and test and feel, grazing Merlin's skull and shoulder and examining his facial bones, the more it smooths out. Thumbs chasing the shape of Merlin's cheekbones, Arthur says, "Nothing's
broken. Are you sure they didn't hit you in the head?"

“Yes.” Merlin breathes harder than he wants to. “Positive.”

As if ensuring Merlin's not lying, Arthur matches gazes with Merlin, scrutinises him for the longest time, waiting for him to crack and admit to the lie. “Right, let's get back to the hotel.”

Though Merlin tries to shrug him off, it's Arthur who helps him up the stairs to get to street level. Even if Merlin doesn't particularly like the notion of having to rely on someone else this way, he finds Arthur solid enough. There's a strength to his body, to the breadth of it, that is buoying. Merlin'll take that for now.

Suiting his pace to Merlin's, Arthur walks him all the way to the nearest taxi stand. To Mithian he says, “I can't be seen to walk into the hotel with you. You'll have to take him up yourself.”

“I'm not exactly dead, you know,” Merlin says, leaning against the taxi's rear end. “I can make it back inside.”

“He's taken a nice pummelling.” In spite of Merlin's attempts to get included, Arthur continues ignoring him, and addressing Mithian. “He may talk nonsense.”

“For the last time I didn't hit my head!” Merlin says, as Mithian bundles him in the back of the car. With a groan he sinks into the leathers of the back seat and nearly closes his eyes before he remembers Arthur and looks back. Arthur is still standing where they left him, bathed in the light of a street lamp, back straight and head tosssed back. He continues keeping the taxi in his sights and Merlin wonders why he does so. The danger seems to have passed. They're fine. There's no need to be so watchful. Arthur must be have a paranoid streak, Merlin concludes. When the car turns into a narrower lane leading away from the river, Merlin loses sight of him and relaxes against the seat.

The bed in his hotel room is soft, yielding. It cocoons his ribs in the most marvellous of ways. When he lets go of the tension in his body, he sighs.

Mithian is emptying the ice belonging to an ice bucket into one of the bathroom towels, when Arthur walks into the room.

“I'm not going to ask how you got the key.” Mostly because Merlin knows Arthur hasn't got one. “I'm fine you know.”

“He isn't.” Mithian bundles the ice up in the towel, which she knots up. “He groaned all the way to the bed.”

“I'm ready for the mission.” Merlin doesn't even want to contemplate what will happen if they fail to make contact with Mithian's uncle. “I'll be up and about in no time.”

“Not if I don't get you painkillers,” Mithian says, as she passes the ice bundle to Arthur. “Will you ice his ribs while I pop into the pharmacy?”

“Yes, certainly” Arthur grabs a hold of the makeshift ice pack.

“I can look after myself, you know?” Merlin's been doing that ever since he got in the army when he was eighteen, well before the KGB put its sights on him.

When Mithian's left, Arthur starts unbuttoning Merlin's shirt.

“Oi,” Merlin says when the cold shock of the ice makes him want to hiss. “Watch it.”

Arthur moves the pack along the line of Merlin's ribs. “That's going to go black and blue.”

“I know.” Though the throb of it is being soothed, Merlin's not so naive as to believe he won't have a hellish night of it. “I've had worse.”

“Me too.” Arthur chases the ice pack with his fingers. He fans them wide along the line between bone and flesh. “It'll swell too.”

Warmth pools into Merlin's face and his breath gets short. He looks away. “We're not postponing the meeting.”

“No. We are not.” Arthur presses the bundle against the soft tissue spreading under Merlin's ribcage. “Answer me this.” He seeks Merlin's gaze. “It was all going so well. You were playing the part to perfection. Yielding but not too much. Just like an ordinary person faced with a mugging. But then something went pear shaped.”

Merlin makes much of his groaning. “Nothing did. They were there to make sure I was what I pretended to be.”

“You didn't want to hand them the camera,” Arthur says, his eyebrow climbing. “Since I can't think there was anything compromising on that film, it was the camera itself that you didn't want to give up.”

Merlin clamps his jaw. “Not really.”

Arthur exhales, eyes on the bundle, and by extension on Merlin's flesh, on his tightening muscles. “Merlin, we're in this together, aren't we? I know we're not truly allies, but if there's something that's stopping you from being clear-headed about the mission...”

Merlin's throat knots, the pain of memory sits heavy on his body, with a sombreness that leaves him breathless. “It was my father's,” Merlin says. The KGB ransacked his papers, ripped his books apart, destroyed many a keepsake. But they left his old Leika behind. “The camera. It was the last thing I had of him.”

“I-- Arthur purses his mouth and reddens. “I'm sorry you lost it.”

Merlin doesn't think Arthur does. There's a uniqueness to Merlin's loss, to its limbo status, to his lack of knowledge that won't fit most other situations. “I don't even know if he's dead or alive...”

“Merlin,” Arthur starts to say, but the door opens and he falls silent.

“I could find some aspirin,” Mithian says, brandishing a white pharmacy bag. “Now let's hope it works.”

Merlin drops his gaze to fix it on the double-stitched hem of the covers.

“Good, great,” Arthur says, dropping the ice pack and facing Mithian. “Give.”

Mithian fills a glass in the bathroom and spoons aspirin into it. She passes it to Arthur and Arthur feeds Merlin its contents.

Soon after he's taken it, Merlin falls asleep.
The Proposal

Ardea, Lazio, Italy, (41° 36' 0" N, 12° 33' 0" E), 28 November 1962, 2.00 pm

The car purrs like a contented cat and steers like a dream, leaning into bends with only a slight touch of the steering-wheel, going round corners with no grumble from the engine. Driving up the hills surrounding Rome, he swerves along roads edged with green and ringed by farmland on which cows graze and horses canter. Because of the previous day's rain, the asphalt shines and streets signs glisten from a distance.

Signalling, he takes a junction and drifts into a suburban area dotted by an interlacing of stately villas spaced out by sloping grounds. When his car approaches, the gates edge open, and Arthur powers his car up a lawn that leads to a large rustic villa. He parks under the shade of wide leaf palm tree. Car locked, he makes for the sprawling garden, where buffet tables clothed in white sit under the sun.

Silver trays loaded with shell fish, lobsters, and complicated salads rest on the table surfaces. After having wiped them, waiters replace bottles with gilded labels into rows of silver ice buckets. Guests in afternoon dresses and solemn suits flit about the spread, their jewellery catching the light as they pick up this or that plate.

As planned, Mithian and Merlin are there too. They're talking to a short man in a bow-tie and hat who bears a slight resemblance to Mithian in the way his mouth and eyebrows are shaped. Mithian has her arm threaded through Merlin's. Merlin's hand has gathered into a fist that bleaches his knuckles. While the short man gesticulates, Mithian rubs her hand up and down Merlin's bicep.

Though he'd like to see if they're making any foray with Mithian's uncle, Arthur can't keep watching the trio without giving out his vested interest in the outcome of their conversation.

Snatching a champagne flute from a passing waiter, he approaches the woman standing by the canapés. Her hair piled high on top of her head, she's wearing a silk jumpsuit that bares her arms and throat. Jewels in the shape of countless bangles sparkle around her wrists.

“Mrs Trollo,” Arthur says, taking it a sip of his drink before setting the glass down on the table. “It's a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“And you are?” Her mouth pinched, Caterina looks him up and down. “I'm afraid I don't remember you.”

“Arthur Pendragon.” Arthur kisses Caterina Trollo's hand, just shy of the rows of rings clustering on her fingers. “At your service.”

Caterina narrows her eyes at him. “I have a perfect memory and I'm sure I never invited any Arthur Pendragon to my party.”

Arthur bows his head. “That's true.” He smiles. “I made rather free with your hospitality. If I'm to be entirely honest, I'll have to admit I gate-crashed your party.”

“You understand I could have you thrown out.” She arches her eyebrows, lifting her head to look past him and at a burly man in a dress jacket whom Arthur takes to be some sort of security guard. “Don't you, Mr Pendragon?”

Arthur knows he's a step away from being shown the door and that's not going to happen without the
use of force either. So he says, “I hope you'll forgive my daring but I have a business proposal for you.” There, he's dangled his bait. “I've heard you're not the type to back down from good deals out of fear for the unknown.”

Contracting at the corners, Caterina's eyes flash. “You have ten minutes to convince me not to boot you.”

Arthur offers Caterina her arm.

Sending the goon lounging by the table a nod, Caterina takes it. She matches her pace to his, shepherding him across the lawn and taking him for a tour of the estate. It's a sprawling mass, an old farmyard surrounded by cypress trees, poplars, and flowering ferns converted to the most modern of standards, with new doors and shutters, both lacquered green, a camera system that tracks the comings and goings of all guests, and fresh paintwork to brighten up old masonry.

“You have a wonderfully picturesque house,” Arthur says, admiring its beauty, the fluidity of its architecture. “That fountain. It's a Bernini, isn't?”

“You have a keen eye for art.” Caterina circles the fountain. “To get it here we had to cut it up in pieces and reconstruct them in situ but I think it was a fair prize to pay for the beauty I get to see every morning.”

Arthur suppresses the shudder he feels at the treatment the Bernini had to undergo so it could be placed in Caterina's garden and focuses on saying the right words, making contact, faking a semblance of common ground. “Worth it, most definitely.”

“As much as I would love to discuss the perks of art acquisition with you, Mr Pendragon,” Caterina says, stopping in her tracks, “I still am no wiser as to who you are and what you want from me.”

“You own extensive property in the country.” Arthur thumbs his jaw as he speaks. “Some of it you wish to keep. But everybody knows how much you want to palm off that villa on the Amalfi coast you inherited from your father in law.”

“I see you listen to rumours.” Caterina takes to strolling round the fountain again, her fingers caressing a set of wide marble wings. “I still don't see what that's got to do with you.”

“You've been trying to sell that villa for years. Unsuccessfully, in spite of a boom economy.” Arthur may not be a trading expert, but he's made sure to study the best overture plans to make to Caterina. “That's because the property is old and would require major refurbishing, which costs money.”

Caterina crosses her arms and taps her fingers. “Still not answering my question, I see. I'm this close to summoning Giovanni.”

It's time for Arthur to really go in for the kill. “I'd be willing to buy that property.”

“Why would you do that?” Caterina's mouth wrinkles.

“Because I'm susceptible to the beauties of the Amalfi coast,” Arthur says, nudging a single shoulder upward. “Because I know what I can make of it.”

Caterina moves closer to him, the silk of her jumpsuit grazing the heavy cotton of Arthur's three-piece ensemble. She looks him in the eye and bites her lip. “And what would that be?”

“A veritable palace.” Arthur needs to gauge this right, not to sell it too hard.
“And you think I couldn't make it that?” Caterina cocks her head. “That's why you want to buy it from me? Because you think I wouldn't be able to make the most of it?”

“Why, no, Caterina,” Arthur says. Flattening his palm against his heart, he adds, “You wound me. I didn't mean to be so vulgar as to imply that. I just know you can't be bothered with so useless a piece of property. And I'm in love with the idea of it.”

Caterina relaxes. “Your offer would have to be very economically sound to tempt me.”

Arthur eases his hands in his pockets and grins. “I can tempt you, believe me.”

Caterina holds his gaze for the longest time and Arthur's very nearly at pains not to crack under it. There's a sharpness to her that's like live blades, a wariness to her that's like a bird of prey's. It's kept in check, restrained, but it feels as though it could be released at any moment. At last she tamps down on the intensity of her scrutiny and says, “Come inside.” She touches his arm. “We should discuss this over a glass of single malt.”

Starting first, she leads him inside the house, past a series of rooms furnished in the farm style fashion, and into a study whose French windows give onto another side of the lawn than the one starting at the gate. Large library shelves face each other, leather armchairs and a wide oak table sitting in between on them on large carpets and tiger skins.

Without sounding Arthur as to his tastes, Caterina goes for the bar and picks up a large cobwebbed bottle. She decants whisky into squat square glasses which she slides along the table separating her from him. “I didn't wish to insult you by asking whether you want ice with it.”

“It's perfect this way,” Arthur says, holding the glass up so that it catches the light streaming in from the garden. “I bow to your good taste.”

“I'm glad you see it like that.” She holds the glass against the corner of her mouth. “I appreciate a man who knows how to bow.”

He toasts her.

She doesn't acknowledge the gesture at all, merely sniffs. “So what's your proposal?”

Later, after he's done his best to convince Caterina he's a bona fide multimillionaire with ties to the City, Arthur saunters back onto the garden. He spies Merlin and Mithian again. They're by the pool, talking with intent. They're so engrossed, they don't notice the man on a collision course with them. He's balding, somewhat squat, but powerful of body. He tanks right into Mithian, then, bouncing back, he profusely apologises.

Arthur arches an eyebrow, but doesn't look to too long, doesn't linger. He grabs a canapé from the table, munches on it, and makes it back to the car.

Night has fallen on Rome, a luminous half moon peeking out from behind the buildings line, when Arthur abandons his position on the balcony. He puts down his wine glass, pockets the key with its heavy embossed ring, and, swapping slippers for shoes, leaves his room. Padding on soft carpets, he makes his way upstairs and enters Merlin and Mithian's room. “So how did it go?”

Mithian closes the wardrobe's door and turns to face Arthur. “My uncle is not being very helpful.”

Arthur leans against the door. “Not amenable, is he?”

“He doesn't like Merlin.” Mithian eyes the door behind which Merlin is presumably ensconced.
“And he says my father is unlikely to want to attend my engagement party.”

“And you think that's true?”

Mithian hugs herself tight. “My father and I have been long estranged.” She ducks her head. “But I like to think he’d see me if it was up to him.”

“So you think he is in our enemies' hands?” Arthur's never doubted it but some confirmation is good to have.

“He must be.” Mithian's lips quiver when she adds, “It can't be otherwise.”

Arthur nods slowly. “Who was that fellow you were talking to by the pool? Just before I went?”

Smoothing her dress, Mithian lowers her gaze. “No one. Just a clumsy American.”

Arthur breathes with relief. “For a moment I thought one of the Trollos' goons was onto Merlin.”

“No, nothing like that.” Clearing her throat, which she cups with her hand, Mithian asks, “So the Trollos?”

“Have them.” Arthur flexes his shoulders backwards. “Hook, line and sinker.”

“Good,” Merlin says, entering the room. “Because I've proof they're up to their necks in it.”


Merlin shows him a tiny device. “Portable Geiger counter.” He winks. “Tiniest there is.”

“Are you saying the Trollos are radioactive?” Arthur refuses to believe that. The Trollos may be greedy but they're not stupid. Merlin must be bonkers to think they might be. Either that or the technology he uses is faulty. “That beggars belief.”

“Not them.” Merlin rolls his eyes. “Not strictly speaking. The soles of Giona's shoes though...”

“They give off radiation?” Thinking of how much time he's spent at the Trollo villa, Arthur suddenly wants a shower.

“Some kind of detritus attached to them does.” Merlin smiles. “Don't worry though. At some twenty rem, it's pretty low level. It's radiation of the kind that would be consistent with plant work. Considering Giona isn't employed at one though...”

Arthur can easily put two and two together. “It's safe to assume he's been playing with material he oughtn't have put his hands on.”

“Yes. The Trollos are really up to their necks in this bomb business.” Merlin plants his hands on his hips. “Giona's definitely our man.”

“Good to have that settled.” Arthur sucks in his lower lip and looks away. “Well, since we have that confirmed, I should get in touch with my superiors and get orders.” When Merlin gives him the eyebrow, Arthur adds, “I suggest you do the same.”

Without waiting for Merlin to put in one word more, he leaves the room.
“Weren't you going to confirm your action plan with your bosses?” Merlin asks as he approaches the high fence. “Because this doesn't look like you checking in with them.”

“I changed my mind.” Arthur cuts into the criss cross of wires barring them access to the Trollo's yard. He's using a pair of big shears with bright red shanks. “I thought I'd strike the iron while it's hot.”

“Mm.” Merlin doesn't believe a word of what Arthur's said. His lying doesn't come as a surprise though, but it does fill him with a dissatisfaction that makes his face red and his skin prickle. Which is patently ridiculous because Merlin should have known that Arthur is nothing but a temporary ally, a rival even. He has to focus on the mission rather than the ethics of working around him, how much the lack of morality cuts him to the quick. “You should thank me.”

“What for?” Arthur slices into one more fence row.

“Disabling the alarm,” Merlin says, just as Arthur finishes shearing a path in for them.

Arthur makes a face at him. “What?”

“You'll notice the alarm isn't sounding.” Merlin lifts his gaze so it falls on the length of the perimeter line. “That's because I disabled it.” He shrugs. “At least temporarily.”

“Um.” Arthur stands and pockets the cutters. “I--”

Merlin can't rein the smile in. “You really are that competitive, aren't you?”

Arthur's lower lip pushes outwards, so it sticks out from under his upper one. “I don't get you.”

“You can't even thank me for doing you a good turn.” Merlin steps through the gap in the fence, looks back. “That's significant, I'd say.”

Arthur puffs his chest out. “It's not.” He sidles so his weight shifts from foot to foot. “I... find it handy. What you did.” He slants his eyes a little, his expression getting shrewder. “I suppose there's a time limit to this alarm disarming of yours though.” He gestures at the fence, the darkness of the compound. “Isn't there?”

Merlin checks his chronometer. “We have ten minutes from now.”

Arthur takes his gun out; Merlin does the same. Avoiding the most direct path, one which lies within view of a watch tower, they cross the courtyard at right angles. At a run they get to the main building. Its base is larger than that of the upper floors, which are built in the shape of a square pyramid, but also darker, because it lacks the array of windows lining the upper floors. The entrance door is wide, reinforced steel. Not something that can be made short work of.

“After you,” Arthur says, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall shoulder first.

Merlin huffs and goes on his knees. Having studied the type of lock he's dealing with, he puts a pick in it and feels around for the pins. He rolls the tumblers one by one.
“Are you done yet?” Arthur intersects his feet at the ankle too.

“Just one moment more.”

In spite of Merlin's words, the lock strains to give. Merlin gives it another jiggle and the last pins lift at the same time. With a soft whoosh, the door clicks open and Merlin and Arthur look at each other. Arthur's eyes brighten and he looks happy. Whether it's with Merlin or the result, Merlin can't tell, but he smiles all the same in return, feeling lighter by a thousand pounds. He's still grinning, still not feeling the tension of the moment, when he enters the building.

The lights are out by they don't need to turn their torches on. The lobby overlooks Baia bay and the moon shining above it provides enough illumination to steer by. At a jog they take the stairs up. The first landing is empty but the second isn't. Lockers line it. A plant stands in its pot in the corner. Maps hang on walls. Some are antique, with convoluted lettering, strange marks, and missing sections. Spotless glass and sturdy frames protect them. Others are tacked to the wall. As quickly as he can Merlin memorises them, especially the blueprints. Just in case...

With no time to spare, they take the corridor at a run. They're halfway through it, when they hear voices.

"La partita era truccata." This one rings clear, sounding close. "Altrimenti avremmo vinto."

"No, ma che dici. Era tutto regolare."

Arthur pushes Merlin into a side corridor and hides in the opening of the opposite one, where shadows lurk. He gestures at Merlin in some kind of code that Merlin can't figure out. It's just a jumble of hand gestures, probably some British Navy thing. To a Russian they all mean squat. It doesn't matter either way because Merlin knows what to do. When the guards pass them, Merlin grabs one from behind, shoves him face first into the wall and chops hard at the base of his neck. The man goes down in a slump, his body limp, limbs folding inwards.

By the time Merlin's done, Arthur's brushing his hands clean, a guard lying senseless at his feet. “It couldn't have taken you longer.”

“Oh come on.” Merlin makes a face. “At most I was ten seconds slower than you.”

Arthur lifts his chin. “In action even a few seconds are vital.”

“Oh come off it, navy man.” Merlin bets Arthur enjoys bragging. It sounds as though it's second nature for him. “It's the results that count.”

“Tell yourself that,” Arthur says, as he takes the weapon of the man he downed.

Triggering the safety, Merlin does the same, then follows Arthur down the corridor and into a wide chamber full of lockers. They're not padlocked so Arthur opens one of them and rifles it. “Personal items, personal items, more of the same, ah, smelly socks.”

Merlin opens another. “Look what we have here.”

With a bang Arthur closes the door of the locker he was searching and crosses over to Merlin. He takes in the radiation suit and the respirator. “So they do handle radioactive material in here.”

Pushing aside the suit, Merlin uncovers the bottom of the locker. A switch with a large button sits at the centre of the back panelling. It's rather unmissable. “Shall we see what happens if I press the magic button?”
“Yes,” Arthur says, his face getting grimmer. “do try it.”

Without hesitating, Merlin puts pressure on the switch. It yields easily and the back panel slides away, giving access to a mezzanine overlooking a stairwell. Nodding to each other, they go down it and start down a tiled hallway. They tread across it and come upon a closed door. It's metal and panel-less. It has no lock either. A number pad opens up at the side of it, arrow keys at the bottom. Such security must be meant to hide something.

“You need an access code,” Arthur says, pulling a face at him.

“I know.” Merlin roots in his pockets, blows powder on the number pad and presses a button. The first combination doesn't work, so he tries a second. “I know.”

“Do you know how many attempts you have with a four digit code?”

“Yes.” Merlin grits out. “Ten thousand if the numbers are repeated.”

“Don't you think we'll never chance on the right one if you try them one by one?”

Merlin is trying out a third combination, when the alarm blares.

“Now what did you do?” Arthur says, pulling him away from the door.


“You must've done something!”

“I did not.”

“You must have!”

Shouts come from deep down the corridor together with the tramp of boots. Arthur lets him go and tenses. Cold sweat blooms at the base of Merlin's spine and he releases the safety of his Makarov. His jaw sets and the tendons in his arms cord. Two men appear at the bottom of the hallway, shouting, clamouring. They're moving at a jog.

When they sight Merlin and Arthur fully, they line up their weapons. In a forward sideways dive, Merlin covers Arthur with his body, and, aiming, shoots the first man in the shoulder and the other in the knee. The second man goes down in a heap and the first one ducks into the hallway bend, disappearing from view.

“You idiot,” Arthur hisses, then grabbing Merlin by the scruff of the neck, Arthur pivots him and propels him forward, taking off at a run after him. Soles skidding, they dash down the corridor, across a landing, and into another straight passageway. They're halfway through, when men come running from the opposite direction. In unison Arthur and Merlin swerve into a side passage. It's bright, empty, the walls are solid and linear. It offers no hiding places.

Sounding closer and closer, shouts follow them. Boots pound on the floor, a multiplicity of them. The first bullet flies right over Merlin's head, moving air with its passage. The second one digs into the wall, splaying plaster left and right. It whitens the knit of Merlin's black crew neck, opening a few cuts on his knuckles.

At the same time, Arthur and Merlin turn and face the floor to ceiling windows. The security guards turn the corner, which brings them into view. Merlin catches Arthur's eyes and the both nod at the same time. They whirl on their feet and shoot at the window. The glass cracks into a cobweb of
lines. They have no time to finish the job, aim more bullets at it because the guards are getting within aiming range. They share a second, more prolonged look, one that vibrates with a kind of tension that cuts Merlin down.

It's harder like this, having a partner to risk. When he's alone Merlin's heart never gets to beat so hard, with a ferocious pump that cuts his breath. When he's alone making the choice is easy. If this goes wrong, he won't be the only one to give up the ghost. Arthur must know it too, but he doesn't exude fear. He stands tall, shoulders pulled back, legs wide apart. Merlin reads determination in Arthur's face, confidence, a readiness to take the next moment head on. Merlin feels it radiating off him in waves. It feeds his resolution too. He makes a sign with his head. It's only a small nod but it will serve the purpose. Arms up over their faces, they start off at a run and make for the window.

A second or so before they get to it, Arthur turns round and grabs him by the waist, so he's the one who impacts the glass first. Given their momentum, Merlin can't stop him. His skin burning, a body of air slamming into him, he falls right through the window.
Rescue

Water gets in his nostrils, in his mouth. It's salty, cold, with a tang to it that makes him gag. Arthur opens his eyes. Darkness envelopes him all around. But it's not compact. It shimmers in a body. It moves. Currents brush at him. Light scarcely penetrates it, licks at it from above in curtains that blow inwards and outwards. He tries to reach for it, to move upwards. But his lungs take to burning, his insides to choke, his throat to constrict, and his sight dims. He fights it. He pushes and kicks, strains, but his hands and legs are heavy and, bubbles streaming past his open mouth, he closes his eyes.

When he reopens them, it's to see Merlin's face from fairly up close. His hair hangs in wet strands over his forehead and his eyes are wide with concern, and just this side of watery. His hands are placed one on top of the other on Arthur's chest, between the nipples. His mouth is red and open, half an inch from Arthur's. It's a pretty-looking mouth, Arthur has to say, with lips that look a plushy and soft. Arthur would kiss it, he thinks with a lightness that makes him want to laugh, but he can't. He can't because foulness rises up his gorge, so he turns on his side and coughs bile and water until his throat burns with it.

In a massaging motion, Merlin pats his back. His hands exude heat, a bundle of warmth, which spreads in patches at the base of Arthur's spine.

"Thank god, you're alive," Merlin says, his palm around Arthur's neck now. "For a moment there I thought you were, well, gone."

Arthur goggles at Merlin, his skin heating in spite of its dampness. "Did you just kiss me?"

"Yes, yes that's what I was doing, you oaf." Merlin stands, kicks at his leg with his foot. There's no force behind it, but his toe caps leave a muddy imprint on Arthur's trousers. "Or maybe, maybe, I was trying to save your life, doing CPR."

In the hopes of getting the vile bile taste off his tongue, Arthur spits out some more. "I didn't need any saving, thank you, and I was only pulling your leg."

"You didn't need any saving! You didn't--" Merlin stomps around him, muttering to himself. "God, you're such a prick."

"Why thank you," Arthur rasps out, cleaning his mouth on his sleeve.

Hands in the air, fending it fast, Merlin paces round and round. "First you pull that stunt and then and then..."

"What stunt?" Arthur pushes off his elbow. If Merlin gives him a moment, he'll be able to spar back with the best of them.

"You know what you did," Merlin says, eyes wide, mouth pinched. "You took the brunt of it, the fall through the glass."

His body a mass of aches and stings, Arthur heaves himself to his feet. "I just returned the favour," Arthur says. "After all you were enough of a nitwit to throw yourself before me when the Trollos' goons shot at us."

"I was only looking after you!" Merlin's voice rises to a crescendo, then plummet again. "I don't know how you can complain about that."
Arthur can't. He can't say he's sad to be alive or that he's unhappy at finding in Merlin a somewhat trustworthy partner. But he can't let himself believe that this state of things will last for long. He can't allow himself to be swayed into a false sense of security. If he did, he'd botch the mission. Which he doesn't plan to do. It's too important. For another, the thought of it, of the eventual betrayal, makes his mouth taste like ashes and his heart clench. He has no wish to put himself in a position of vulnerability and accepting Merlin's behaviour at face value would be doing just that. Never mind the little voice reminding him of what happened on that roof in Berlin. "That's completely beside the point."

"I don't get how!"

"You just don't do that." Arthur holds a finger before Merlin's nose. "You just don't place yourself in the way of bullets. Understand?"

Merlin shakes his head, compresses his lips. His gaze converging on Arthur's wagging finger, he intercepts Arthur's hand and forces it down. "Actually, no. What you're saying makes no sense. Would you rather I let you die? We're in this together!"

"Yes." Arthur's throat works. "For the time being."

Merlin's nostrils flare and he squints away in the distance, shoulders back and up. "I have a moral code."

Arthur wants to tell him he knows, that he believes him, that he thinks he's got him sussed out. But he can't allow that level of... camaraderie. "I'm not saying you don't. I'm saying you have a duty which comes before everything else, much as I do."

Merlin doesn't reply. He bows his head and walks away. He's not slow about it, but there's a stiffness to him that wasn't there before. When he's up the slope leading towards the the road, he cups his mouth and calls out. "We need to be off."

"Oh now you're off in a huff." Arthur doesn't like it. Doesn't enjoy it in the least. It's patently wrong and jarring and makes him want to act out so maybe Merlin will get back to being more friendly. "Stop sulking and come back here."

"No," Merlin shouts back. "I hid the car over here."

Air whistling through his teeth, Arthur mouths a few curse words, then loud enough, says, "What?"

From the top of the slope Merlin calls out, "Have you forgotten about the alarm?"

Arthur hasn't. It's still ringing in his ears. "Nuh."

"Because you're likely going to be the number one suspect for our spot of breaking and entering." Merlin has cupped his mouth to yell that. "And the first thing the Trollos are going to do is check you're where you're supposed to be. And that's in Rome."

"Shit." Water squelching in his boots as he does, Arthur runs up the slope. "Shit."

The car is actually a baby blue Ape van with a canvas awning and rust around the bumper. It has no radio and when it pushes thirty miles per hour the engine starts coughing. The axle screeches and the roof flaps.

As he holds on to the bar above the window for dear life, Arthur's mouth crimps. "Such a Soviet means of transport."
Merlin, still wet as a drowned rat, glares at the road ahead. “So tell me, what other car should I have chosen for a secret reconnaissance mission?”

“I don't know.” Arthur makes big eyes at Merlin, then slaps his palm against his forehead. “No, wait, I do. A faster one!”

Merlin snorts. “You mean a flashier one, one that would have got me caught in a second flat.”

“I mean one,” Arthur says, “that can take us back to Rome before the second bloody coming happens.”

They drive along narrow, winding lanes and away from the coastline towards asphalt roads that take them deep into the countryside. Somewhere north of the border between Lazio and Campania, they rejoin the motorway. As they chug along, the engine vibrates and at one time it spits out wide clouds of steam. But Merlin doesn't let the Ape's shortcomings foil him. Pushing it to its limits without bypassing them entirely, he manages to speed along at a pace that doesn't do the motor in and that yet allows them to maintain a decent pace. With a few more protests from the carburettor, they make it to central Rome. So as not to be seen, they park the Ape in a back street and jog towards their hotel's service entrance. It's a narrow one that juts onto a side alley, a small white awning crowning it.

Before Merlin can clear it, Arthur says, “Hey, Merlin.”

Merlin turns in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Thank you.” Arthur scrubs a hand up his nape. “For saving me.”

Merlin straightens, his head goes to the side and he smiles. “In that case thank you for cushioning my fall.” Merlin rubs two fingers down the line of his jaw. “You helped me out too.”

“Well, I suppose I did.”

“Let's call each other even then,” Merlin says, his gaze lingering on Arthur before he turns around and enters the hotel.

Knowing the Trollos might catch up with them at any time, they both rush up the stairs. They work their way past the service area, running into a rather flabbergasted waiter carrying a silver-domed tray, and bound into the guest area, climbing next onto the piano nobile.

A little breathless, they stop on the landing. They exchange no words, but gaze at each other for a few moments. Arthur can't guess what Merlin's trying to tell him with that look, whether he's wishing him good luck, or suggesting he watch out. Either way, he takes the glance at face value, as an acknowledgement of their complicity when it comes to the mission. He nods then, and Merlin does too.

Needing to go before he says or does something utterly stupid, before the floodgates of awkwardness open, Arthur tears away.

Merlin, from what Arthur can tell, doesn't move from his spot, not until a few longs seconds have passed. Only then do his footsteps, heavy and thunderous, resound up the stairwell.

Slamming the door of his room behind him, Arthur pulls off his still wet clothes and hides them at the bottom of the wardrobe, under the fleecy blanket that comes with the extra linens. He dives into the bathroom, slips on the hotel bathrobe, and dry towels his hair. When he's done, he slings the terry cloth around his neck. He's leaning against the basin, fingers curled around the rim, when there's a knock on his door.
He finds Caterina Trollo on the other side. She's done up to the nines, wearing a blue and white
dress, and an elaborate hair-do made of tresses flowing into a loose knot. Her make-up looks freshly
applied, not a smudge in sight. It's as though in her world it's not four o'clock in the morning at all.
But though her attire is picture perfect, her expression isn't exactly as nonchalant. Her eyebrows
touch her hair line and her mouth slides slowly open upon sight of Arthur. “I, um, have come to talk
business.”

“Pray,” Arthur says, swiping a hand towards the interior of room, “make yourself comfortable.”
Slamming the door behind him, Merlin rushes into their room.

Mithian puts the phone down and arches an eyebrow. “What's with all the hurry?”

“Arthur is downstairs with Caterina Trollo,” Merlin says, opening the window. The balcony is marble-floored, small in the way of terraces in old buildings, but the rail is low and there's a window ledge to the south of it. “I think he may be in danger.”

Putting on her dressing gown, Mithian follows him on the balcony. “Merlin?”

“Yeah,” Merlin says, as he straddles the rail.

Mithian wets her lips, hugs herself. “I think Arthur can look after himself.”

Merlin lifts his other leg over the rim of the balcony and tiptoes along the outer ledge of it. “I'll admit he's an okay operative.” He inches forwards, pieces of masonry crumbling away. “But he needed some saving earlier today and I think he might still.”

“He's still pretty good, Merlin,” she says. “He got me out of East Berlin, after all, and I think he deserves some leeway?”

Merlin glances downwards, at Arthur's balcony. The glow of the light from within expands outwards, glazing the panes with its shine. He frowns at it, strains his hearing, but he can make out no alarming noises, no shots, no screams, no sound of furniture being broken. “You're right,” he tells her. “He can sort it out.”

“There's something else.” Mithian cinches her robe with a tug on its belt. “My uncle rang.”

With a swift motion, Merlin lands on the other side of the balcony, where Mithian is. “And?”

With an exhale that sets her nostrils quivering, Mithian says, “He says it's a go.”

“He's arranged a meeting with your father?” Merlin knew Mithian's uncle was lying when he said he couldn't. And now here's the confirmation. “When?”

“Tomorrow.” Mithian turns around and walks back into their room. She sits at the tip of her bed and lets her hair fall forward so it shadows her face. “At noon.”

“That's good,” Merlin says, botching a smile. “We'll get your father back and stop the Trollos in their tracks.”

“That's good, yes.” She wrings her hands. “That's what I wanted.”

“Mithian?” Merlin tilts his head. “Is something wrong?”

Mithian looks up. She's pale, her lips have thinned from compression, and have blanched. “I'm scared, Merlin. What if I can't save him?”
Merlin goes on his knees and takes her hands in his. “Hey.” He gives her palms a squeeze. “I'll be helping you. Arthur will be helping you.” Merlin and Arthur might have slightly different objectives but he's sure they both want to help Mithian. “Together we'll make it.”

“You're there for the bomb though.” Mithian's throat works. “And I get it. It's important. Save the world and all that. But I want to save my father too.” She releases a breath together with a harsh chuckle. “I know I haven't met him in long years. I know he left me behind. But I need to.”

“I understand,” Merlin says, his gaze dimming a bit as he casts it inwards. “My father... It's not the same as you, of course.” Balinor didn't exactly leave of his own volition and he has no idea how he'd feel if he had. But then again had Mithian's father? He left Berlin behind but how much had politics to do with that? “But I haven't seen my father for years.” He gulps. “I actually have no idea if he's alive or dead.” Or how much he suffered before he died. “I get it. It's not easy.”

Mithian buries her head in Merlin's neck, her nose damp with tears, her hands clutching at him with frantic fingers. “Oh, Merlin. This is so hard.”

That night Mithian doesn't sleep. She tosses and turns, sighs and punches her pillow. Merlin falls in and out of dozes, watches her in the dark. He wishes he could find the words to soothe her but he knows there's nothing he can say that he hasn't already shared with her. Platitudes aren't what she needs now. She needs for him to succeed in their plan and save her father. He must do his best tomorrow and that's it. Still, Merlin's heart doesn't fail to go out to her.

Towards dawn he falls in a fitful sleep that leaves him sweat drenched and sticking to the sheets.

Arthur wakes him from it, pulling his blankets away from his body.

In a flail, Merlin tumbles right off the bed. “Umpf,” he says, his brow getting lines, “you really are a twat, aren't you?”

“Up and about, Merlin.” Arthur claps his hands together. “Today's the day.”

“And here I was worrying about you.” Merlin disentangles himself from a length of sheet Arthur didn't succeed in wrestling from him. “I see you're quite fine.”

Arthur's face crinkles. “Uh?”

“Caterina Trollo?” Merlin says. “In your room.”

“Oh that.” Arthur's facial muscles relax. “I was able to talk her round by promising her a down payment on the villa, which is entirely moot because we're going to nab them today.”

Tightening one of the ribbons decorating her mini dress, Mithian walks in from the bathroom. “So,” she says, “the game is on.”

“Indeed.” Arthur sends Merlin a glance. “Now if a certain someone would stop lazing about.”

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Merlin picks himself up and gives himself a dust-off he doesn't necessarily need.

Mithian asks, “So how do I make sure we stay in contact?”

“Transmitter,” both Merlin and Arthur say at the same time, then start speaking simultaneously again. They concomitantly clamp their jaws.
“I have a good one,” Merlin says. “Latest make.”

“Same.” Arthur shrugs.

Mithian breaks into a laugh. There's some strain to it but it's genuine, high pitched. “I'll take both,” she says. Then batting her eyelashes, she adds, “A girl can never be too sure.”

Merlin slips his transmitter into the lining of Mithian's garter. With a little fumbling he activates it until it whirs with a click. Mithian says it tickles, improvises a smile, then tenses again, looking into the distance. Her wide-eyed, shadowed gaze then falls on Merlin and he finds himself telling her they will be there for her, that everything will be alright. She straightens, nods; the corners of her lips lift before sagging again. Sharing a worried look with Merlin, Arthur gives her a jewel hair clip that contains a second device. It's big and shiny and comes in the shape of a butterfly. Mithian wrinkles her nose at it. “Don't you think it's a bit much?”


Arthur smirks right back. “And Merlin’s got no taste.” With a more sober expression, he addresses Mithian. “It had to be large enough to contain the hardware.”

Once they've tested the communicators and they're sure they work, they set off.

The door of the room has just closed behind them and Merlin and Arthur have stalked off down the corridor, when Mithian says, “Promise me, boys, promise me you'll look out for each other.”
The Game Is On

From his table at the hotel bar, Arthur watches Mithian duck into her uncle's car. It's a white Alfa Romeo with fresh paint, personalised plates, and reflective hubcaps. It comes with a liveried chauffeur, whose cap's visor looks iron rigid and whose shirt cuffs poke out stiffly from under his uniform's sleeves. Once Mithian's climbed in, the chauffeur closes the car's door. He then trudges round the vehicle, settles behind the wheel, adjusts the rear-view mirror, and drives off.

Once the car is in motion, Merlin powers his bike after it. As he passes the bar's window, he turns his head a notch and matches gazes with Arthur. Arthur can't acknowledge him, can't show that he knows him or is aware of what's going on, but he raises his espresso cup to his lips, and arches an eyebrow. Merlin's lips twist and his jaw sets. Arthur reads it as assurance, as a declaration of intent, of Merlin's determination to succeed in their plan. Or Arthur might be dreaming things and the gesture is nothing more than a brief salute. Either way Arthur hopes that Merlin doesn't get himself killed, that he's careful out there. If something happened to him, it would be such a waste of a decent spy, of a good fellow. Because Merlin's ultimately that, isn't he? In spite of his being Russian, he plays fair, sticks to the rules of intelligence, of good sportsmanship and, beyond that, he's upright, good-hearted. Arthur can't quite contemplate the thought of him dying. And Merlin won't. Arthur'll make sure.

Having steered his bike further along the road, Merlin disappears from view. Arthur leaves a generous two-banknote tip on the table and walks out of the bar. Hailing the hotel's bellboy, he brandishes a pair of keys and says, “Have someone bring my car round.”

When Arthur slips behind the wheel, he takes a moment to brace himself, arms held stiffly out, then he slips into first gear and sets off.

By day the Trollo shipyard looks entirely different from what it does at night. Guards patrol it more heavily than during any other shift. It's not just the reduced complement that periodically checks in on the area by night. It's a veritable bevy of armed personnel, sauntering back and forth along the perimeter fence, the restricted areas, weapons in plain sight at their hips. Workers in white overalls parade out and about, carrying tool boxes, ladders, and lengths of coiled wire. Cargos overloaded with shipment containers enter and exit the private basin, the cement partitions that dam it opening to allow them entry.

Once security has waved him through, Arthur parks the car. He's barely stepped out of it, when a bespectacled secretary wearing a pin-striped suit says, “Ho ordini di condurla dalla Signora Trollo.”

Having led him across the compound and into one of its outbuildings, the secretary ushers him into Caterina's office. It's not in a part of the shipyard Arthur's visited before. It's separated from the rest of the complex by a wide yard and faces, instead of the basin, the open Baiae Bay. Large floor to ceiling windows show a vista of azure seas crimped with white at the top, sail boats fending the water in this and that direction, and a stark, green-clad promontory that juts out towards the horizon.

Caterina's desk, behind which she sits, looks towards this set of windows, affording its owner a fantastic view of the gulf.

When Arthur strolls forward, Caterina nods. She taps the phone receiver with her nail, toys with its cord, and goes on with her conversation. “Certo, Signor Generale, l'affare é fatto. Può aspettarsi di ricevere l'involucro in qualche ora.” She nods and hums. “No, non é un ritardo, Signor Generale. Capirà che bisogna tenersi alla largo dalle autorità.”
As he pretends not to listen, Arthur saunters round, hands in his pockets, eyes on the objects lining Caterina's shelves. Objects d'arts populate it in the shape of shields, statuettes, and other knick-knacks, some small and dainty looking, made of spun glass and faïence; others forged out of silver or bronze. Though he makes a show of evaluating them, picking one up – a little nosegay-bearing shepherdess enamelled in summer colours– and weighing it in his palm, he's actually listening in, trying to decipher Caterina's words. His Italian is not as good as his French, but it's enough to tell him that Mrs Trollo is talking to a general about some sort of delivery, which must not happen in sight of the authorities.

It's enough to perk Arthur's interest, to make him prick his ears and wish Caterina would say more. But she doesn't. She only hems and haws in acquiescence and, with a quick goodbye, she puts a stop to her call and hangs the receiver. “Mr Pendragon, thank you for your patience.” She lifts her eyebrow. “I'm all yours now.”

“I appreciate it,” Arthur says, “I know how busy you are.”

“Pray do have a drink.” She eyes the bar counter. “I have some excellent brandy; had it especially delivered for meetings just like this one.”

“Um, no.” Arthur's not as stupid as she thinks. “I'd rather talk business with a clear head.”

She tilts her head to the side. “You don't trust me to conduct our transaction fairly?” She bats her eyelashes. “You think you can't go head to head with me just because you've a little drink in you? Really, Mr Pendragon, how very spiritless of you.”

Arthur shrugs. “I'm merely watching out for myself. As a business woman yourself, you'll understand how much prudence matters.”

“I can't say that I worship at the altar of prudence.” She waves her hand back in a dismissive gesture. “It's a pity though.”

Arthur stops on his way over to the chair. “What is?”

She pushes a red button in-built on her desk's worktop. “Having to knock you out. We could have done this in a much more civilised manner.”

The door flies open and two men who are overall larger and wider than it burst in.

“I see,” Arthur says, hand going for the gun he has hidden in the folds of his jacket. “That's how you want it.”

Caterina lifts an enamel-grip pistol from an open drawer and tuts. “I wouldn't if I were you.”

One of her goons grabs Arthur from behind, forcing his hands together behind his back. His grip is steel and fit to shatter bones. If Arthur makes the wrong move, it very well might. The other, a bold bloke with a potato face and muscles that bulge thick under the canvas of his shirt, searches him.

“Hey,” Arthur says, struggling to get free, “don't you think that's rather too intimate for a first date?”

The second goon finds Arthur's gun, pockets it, and then punches Arthur in the spleen.

Pain blooms deep in Arthur's stomach, bile rises to his throat and he goes to his knees, fighting against a retching bout.

Caterina Trollo walks round the desk, and, silks rustling as she moves, she leans against its front
edge, pistol levelled at Arthur. “Now, now, Mr Pendragon.” She tsks. “Don't make matters worse. You're enough of a professional to know that resistance is futile.” She hums to herself. “You're in my power now.”

Just to prove her wrong, Arthur struggles. Goon One holds his arms in such a killing grip, Arthur's shoulder is almost knocked out of joint. Tendons twinge, nearly tear. His muscles stretch to a burn. He has no time to find a position that will relieve him of a measure of pain, one from which to work himself free, because, before he can, Goon Two lands another hit on his stomach. This one hurts less, because it connects with sinew rather than soft flesh, but it leaves him winded, sore. The aftershocks of it aren't nice either. Adrenaline courses through him and freezes him; a deep ache spreads to the areas surrounding the bruise.

“I hope that got my message across,” Caterina says. “See, fact is, I know who you are, what you're here for, and I have no intention of letting you get the upper hand in this game.”

Arthur has no reason to believe Caterina is doing anything other than telling the truth. If she'd bought his story, she wouldn't be having the living daylights punched out of him. She might be into shady business, but even she is not so foolish as to blow her cover. She'd be sabotaging her standing among those who take her to be a Roman entrepreneur and chasing away money coming from respectable sources. No, you only use with force with those who know what sort of playground bully you really are. So it's clear she knows. It's likely Arthur has made some mistake somewhere and that she's put two and two together. Even so, he can't let her see she's right. He's going to stick to his farce, continue playing his part. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Caterina huffs. “Are you going to deny you're an MI6 spy, Mr Pendragon?” She waves her pistol about. It could go off at any moment. “Don't even try to.”

“You must be out of your mind.” Arthur can only buy time now so Merlin can hopefully complete their mission unhindered. That's what counts, stopping the Trollos from unleashing a nuclear hell. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if it's not him who prevents them, if it's a Russian operative who puts a stop to their power-hungry plan. Not at this point. Probably, if he's honest with himself, at no point has it ever mattered. World peace comes first. Besides, by wasting Caterina's time he's making sure Merlin survives this. Because he must; Arthur won't contemplate the alternative. “Have you read one too many cheap thrillers? Because, let me tell you, the tale you're spinning sounds like something that Fleming fellow would write.”

This time the uppercut lands on the side of his jaw, opening skin, causing blood, coppery-tasting and tangy, to course down Arthur's face, to the corner of his mouth. Some drips onto Caterina's shaggy carpet, smearing its whiteness crimson. Arthur can't say he isn't getting his jollies out of that.

“There's no point equivocating, my dear Mr Pendragon,” Caterina says, her face losing the smile and freezing into a hate-filled moue. “I know everything about you because Mithian Nemeth told me.”

“Mithian?” Arthur rasps that.

“Yes, pretty girl, isn't she?” Caterina nudges up her shoulder. “She ratted you out.”

Arthur shakes his head. He knows human beings are capable of betrayal. He gets how Mithian's past may have influenced her choices, taken its toll on her. Maybe she's been brainwashed by the regime. It's not as if the Stasi doesn't do that. Maybe she's just fighting for her ticket out of the lifestyle a life in a dictatorship condemned her to and framing Arthur was it for her. Both theories are likely. But somehow, even aware of the truth as he now is, he can't believe he pegged her wrong. He can't get it into his head; he can't truly accept she's sold him to the Trollos, sentencing him to a certainly unpleasant death. But he has made a big blunder and she has fooled him. If there is a next time,
Arthur promises himself he won't let himself be charmed by gutsy East Germans. In spite of how hopeless this is though, Arthur can't give up. He must salvage this any way he can. He rolls his shoulders back, thrusts his chin up and says, “And you believe her?”

“Of course I do.” Caterina buffs one of her pink-varnished nails with the pad of her thumb. “She's Nemeth's daughter and Nemeth's mine. She has no reason to lie.” She pauses, bites her lip. “Besides, she did more than just giving me one single MI6 agent.”

Arthur won't give her the satisfaction of asking. He remains straight-faced, passive. He doesn't even strain in his captors' grip.

Caterina, though, won't have it. “Oh, yes.” She sighs. “She also got me that partner of yours, the lanky Russian spy, what his name? Ambrosov. That's it, Ambrosov”

This time Arthur jabs back with his elbow, twists one arm free. Goon One puts pressure on Arthur's other arm, wrenches it back while Goon Two grabs him by the hair and knees him in the jaw. A sharp throbbing pain knifes through Arthur, blinds him with its sharpness. When Arthur slumps, Caterina's bloody ruffian punches his nose, jaw, and stomach, one after the other, in rapid succession.

“Oh yes, both of the agents who were set against me have fallen into my trap,” she says, standing straighter. “And the nuclear bomb Nemeth was supposed to build for me? It's ready and it's on its way to its buyer, a man who'll make me filthily rich.”

Before Arthur can react to that blood-curdling revelation, a blow hits him at the base of his skull and all thoughts stop. Pain blooms like wild-fire across his nerve-endings, his muscles seize, and his heart stabs him. Darkness takes him.
Further Orders

Merlin sprawls on the ground in the high grass behind a bush that expands outwards, heavy with bladed foliage and red, drying berries. Behind this cover, he places the receiver, and sets up the antennae. On his head he places the headphones. They're black and heavy, isolating him from the sounds of the outside world.

By fiddling with the receiver's knobs, he calibrates the apparatus. At first he hears nothing but the crackling of static. Turning the dial around, he hears the garbling of some radio station, the brash commentary of a presenter, followed by the warbled melody of a Tenco love song. When he smacks the side of the receiver, he finally tunes into a conversation.

He can make out three different voices. One's Mithian's. Its lightly pitched, musical as it always is, but circumspect. The other is her uncle's. It's low and throaty, the voice of a smoker. The third one is softer, smoother, masculine. Though he's never heard him speak for any length of time, Merlin assumes it belongs to Giona Trollo.

“Another glass of champagne,” Giona Trollo says.

“No,” Mithian says. “It's too early for me.”

“So,” Mithian's uncle says, “you wanted to see your father?”

“I thought you'd promised I would,” Mithian says.

“And you will.” Giona Trollo's the next to speak. He must have moved a chair about because the scraping sounds loud. “We just need to cross the Ts.”

“And that means?”

“Do ut des,” Giona Trollo says. “I give you something and you give me something.”

Merlin grinds his teeth. He waits for Mithian to speak.

When she does, there's a calculated reserve to her tone. “And what is this something you want?”

“Help us convince your father to give us his formulas, his calculations.” Trollo smacks his lips together loudly. “And you'll get to see him.”

“His calculations for his atom bomb model?” Mithian voice echoes hollowly. “He won't give it to you. If he does, you'll have what you want and you'll kill him.”

“Have you anything else to trade?”

“Yes,” Mithian says. “Get me to meet my father and I'll give you the two agents on your tail.”

“And who would they be?” Giona must have leant forward, because the chair rattles against stone.

“One's Arthur Pendragon, your wife's new chum,” Mithian says. “The other you'll find somewhere around your property, listening in on this conversation.”

Merlin throws the headphones, leaves the gear where it is, and starts running. From his study of the blueprints hanging in the shypard, he remembers that the fence lies a few hundred yards from his position, so he throws his chin up, pumps his arms, pistons his legs and makes for it. As he runs, an
alarm sounds in the villa and dogs bark in the distance. He careers ahead at such a pace his soles barely touch the ground. His breath comes fast, squeezed out of lungs that get smaller and smaller. His legs stagger and he nearly stumbles, but rights himself at the last moment. His heart has pumped all the blood he has into his muscles, when finally the ground slopes and the perimeter barrier springs into view. Finding purchase with hands and feet, he jumps at it, climbs two lengths and then vaults over. As he lands on the other side, his shins smart, but he doesn’t let that stop him.

Along overgrown paths shaded by century-old trees, he bolts forward and down hill. Where the ground is dusty, he slips and slides but he doesn’t slow down. He’s got momentum and that's all he needs. Reducing his speed would amount to him wasting precious time.

The bike is where he left it, hidden behind a wall of fronds. He swipes the foliage from off its top and mounts it. With a turn of keys, the engine roars.

He launches it along the motorway and down country tracks that are mostly dirt. Taking a network of pathways that cut across fields, he crosses high mounds covered with freshly turned earth. At last he catches a whiff of sea scent on the air and powers his bike towards the coastline.

He comes upon the Trollo shipyard from behind. The bike he parks a safe distance away. Crouching as he advances, he comes upon an unguarded side of the fence, one that faces nothing but the hills that stretch into the interior. He stalks the length of it and when he locates a control box, he kneels. If he had more time, he would do this differently, be more cautious, but Arthur is in there and the Trollos know about him. Merlin has to get him out before it's too late.

He pries open the control box and finds a matted knot of wires inside it. Some are blue while others shine red and black. Merlin has no time to sort out which does what, so he takes the cutters from his utility belt and snips at the heart of them. Since it's daylight, lights don't go off and, given that Merlin has cut all electricity, neither does the alarm. He doesn't know how long he has till the generator kicks in, but however long that is, he's got to make it.

Without the shield of darkness, entering is no easy feat. As soon as he's in, he clocks a couple of guards. He makes a dash for cover and hides behind a mini-van with a canvas roof. As they move, he moves. When they stop, he does too, angling himself this way and that way so the bulk of the vehicle will hide him. The guards lean together and murmur. Have they heard him? Have they seen him?

Merlin takes his gun out and gently eases the safety off so that it only makes the dullest, softest of sounds.

The guards move forward.

As they do, they take their weapons out. They're getting significantly closer to Merlin, when Caterina Trollo appears at the edge of the yard. Two men flank her as she walks. “You,” she shouts to the guards. “I want you to come with me.”

“Si, signora Trollo,” the tallest guard says, before gesturing for his companion to follow.

Merlin watches as the guards rejoin Caterina Trollo and her bodyguards. Caterina ducks into a black limousine while the bodyguards take the front seats. The compound heavies stuff themselves in the back either side of Caterina. In an exhaust cloud, the car disappears past the main building.

Good, Caterina is away, which means Merlin will have more leeway. Everybody at the shipyard seems to obey her and her solely; without her they’ll be scrabbling around like headless chickens. Buoyed by this, he crosses the backyard and tries the door. It's open, so he slides inside. Once he's
in, he pauses to take his bearings. A flight of stairs leads upstairs, another downwards. Merlin doesn’t think Caterina has imprisoned Arthur anywhere near the offices, not by day, when the compound does act as a shipyard, with workers, clients, and business partners coming and going. There's acting above the law and then there's ignoring the fact even one's own employees might turn coats if they detect strange goings on.

Once he's sure of his location, he dashes downstairs. He lands on a mezzanine upon which a set of lifts open. He takes one down and when the door opens he's faced with one of the guards. The guard goes for his gun, but Merlin pounces. He grabs him by the neck and drags him forward. Using his acquired momentum, Merlin swings the man around and slams his face into his own knee. The guard's mouth springs open and his eyes bulge out. Without giving the guard any time to react or recoup, Merlin rams him against the lift's back partition and punches him in the stomach. The guard kicks backwards, flails in self-defence. Merlin chops at his neck with the slim side of his hand; the guard sighs and slumps. When he's out, Merlin searches him for weapons and takes his gun and knife.

The gun he disassembles; the knife he slings under his belt. Watching left and right for any sign of potential danger, Merlin jogs down the corridor. A set of doors opens onto a gallery hewn out of rock. The walls bleed dampness and the floor slopes lower and lower. Regardless, Merlin dashes down the passage, skidding here and there he's going so fast. But for the lights overhead, it gets progressively darker, more forbidding. The walls arch and go concave. His footsteps echo. Merlin realises he's in some kind of cave.

Further along it, cells open. These are small chambers, enlarged natural nooks to which bars have been added. The rails themselves look old, eaten away by rust and verdigris, but the locks are brand new, shiny, showing oil stains from recent greasing. There are no keys in sight, but that doesn't seem to matter as the cells themselves are empty.

Given that there's no sign of Arthur so far, Merlin proceeds along the row of dungeons. When a guard comes upon him, Merlin stuns him with a punch in the face. He ducks a retaliatory uppercut and spins to the side. He isn't fast enough and the guard's fist connects with his chest, knee and jaw. Merlin goes skidding across the floor. Pain passes through him like a wave; it flares bright before settling into a deep, bone-jarring ache. For a moment he's steeped into confusion, his ears ring, and his body gives signs of giving up the struggle for consciousness. Knowing that he can't leave Arthur in the hands of the Trollos though, Merlin grits his teeth and flips back up his feet. "Right, so you want to play it like that," he says in Russian.

At that the guard makes a face, shrugs, and puts his fists up. Merlin ducks a punch, wheels round and kicks the guard in the side, knocking the wind out of him. Without giving him a chance to recover, Merlin roundhouse kicks him in the shoulder. His opponent cradles the injured limb, lowering his guard. Exploiting that, Merlin hits him in the head, punches him in the middle, and low kicks him in the shin, sending him to the floor. The guard gasps and moans. Merlin grabs him by the hair and crushes his head to the floor. The skin doesn't break and the man doesn't bleed, but he's out like a light and will be for a while yet.

With the man down, Merlin pushes forward, rushing headlong down the corridor. He's almost come to the end of it, when he sees the cell. He flattens himself against the wall of a side passage and scopes out the area.

The cell door stands open and two people occupy it. One, a guard in the blacks and whites of the Trollo uniform, hulks over the other. When the guard moves to the side, Merlin can see that the second person stuck in with him is Arthur. Shackles tie him to floor and ceiling, heavy duty irons around his hands and feet. Since the chain holding him up is pulled taut, Arthur's soles barely touch
the ground.

A perpendicular cut smears his cheek red and blood trails leave his mouth and nose. Tears show in his shirt and beneath them lies soft, purpling skin.

As he paces the length of the cell, the guard rolls up his sleeves. His knuckles are red and his hands have abrasions in other places too. “I'm sorry I have to do this, but Mrs Trollo said I must.” He punches Arthur right in the gut and Arthur retches. “I should kill you fast, and I would, but she said to make it slow.”

“Nice to know this isn't a kink of yours then,” Arthur says, his voice a rasp.

The guard screws his face up in folds of anger and he hits Arthur hard in the belly.

Arthur coughs, inhales sharply, spits on the floor.

Quivers of anger lashing through him at the sight of Arthur being beaten, Merlin moves sideways, away from the shadows and into the light.

When Arthur sees him, his eyes grow large, but then his expression flattens again.

“I don't like you,” the guard rumbles, pulling Arthur by the hair and hitting his face with the flat of his palm. The smack is sonorous and Arthur's head bounces backwards. “I don't like you in the least.”

“Good.” That comes out of Arthur in a rattle. “I wouldn't want you to get off on this.”

The guard's fist rises high in the air. Merlin takes his gun, aims, and fires.

Red blooms on the man's white shirt and he staggers backwards, then forwards. When Arthur knees him, he crumples to the floor, blood pooling around him.

“Took you long enough, Merlin,” Arthur says, pulling at his shackles. “Care to get me out of these?”

Merlin holsters the gun and hurries over to Arthur. He takes a pin out of his pocket and starts fiddling with the shackles. They're old and rusty and Merlin has a hard time getting the mechanism to yield, but then it gives, and Arthur falls into his arms.

Wrapping an arm around Arthur's middle, Merlin holds him steady. They're standing body to body, with Arthur's face pressed against Merlin's neck and Merlin's nose brushing Arthur's throat. “Are you okay?” Merlin asks Arthur, his palm cupping his head, his fingers brushing at his hair, in a slow, soothing motion. “Arthur, are you all right?”

Arthur doesn't say anything. He inhales sharply and Merlin can feel his lashes as they fan down.

“Yes, of course, I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.” Arthur, in fact, smells like blood and sweat and Merlin can't say he likes what that implies, the pain he's had to go through. Merlin should have got there sooner, made sure Arthur was fine. They're partners. Instead he was slow and sloppy and now Mithian's betrayed them and the Trollos are winning this hand. “Not in the least.”

“Well, I am.” Arthur shudders. “Besides I'll have you know I'm a very resourceful agent and that I was just about to free myself when you turned up.”

Merlin can't help give a snort. “Yeah, right.”
“No sarcasm, Merlin.” Though he's still leaning heavily against Merlin, standing belly to belly with him, his face tucked against Merlin's, Arthur pinches him in the side. “It doesn't suit you.”

Merlin steps back just so he can match gazes with Arthur. He swipes his thumbs under his eyes, chasing away the blood smears, and wishing he could do the same with the bruising and the aches that must come with it. “Maybe you're right.” Merlin's tried to wean himself from caring. He's made an attempt to become as tough as his other KGB comrades are. But the truth is his heart bleeds and feeling pulls at him. He can't stop it and finds he has less and less wish to. “Who knew you were wise?”

Arthur doesn't move, keeps resting his bulk against Merlin, keeping them in a mock embrace. His breath goes out of him in regular puffs that tickle Merlin's skin, warm it in waves. “I'm actually very sagacious.” He sucks in a deep breath; his shoulders slump. “And that's what tells me we ought to get moving. Caterina Trollo...”

“Has left the shipyard,” Merlin says, gearing his thoughts towards the mission. Any other consideration is too dangerous now, too liable to hurt him. “And she has a functional bomb.”

“I know.” Arthur's teeth grind noisily. “She bragged about it.”

“We should stop her.” Merlin releases Arthur, but only once he's sure he can stand on his own two feet.

“The sooner the better,” Arthur says, pulling his sleeves down and tugging at his shirt's collar. When it's smoothed to his satisfaction, he retrieves his jacket from a cell corner, where it lies in a heap, gives it a hefty shake, and puts it on. “I don't intend to run any risk when it comes to that bomb.”

Merlin's exiting the cell, when his body stiffens and he says, “Mithian's in on it. She's turned coat.”

“I know,” Arthur says, his expression emptying of feeling. “I know.”

They emerge from the Trollo compound and dash towards the back fence Merlin climbed when he entered the perimeter. Matching their pace, they run towards the hills. The ground slopes and the vegetation thickens, so they have evergreen needles under foot and they have to brush aside low hanging boughs and foliage. At last they come upon Merlin's bike. It's barely hidden by a bush and the key shines in the ignition. From the top-box, Merlin takes his portable radio, which he balances on the saddle. He carefully tunes the contraption. When he's on the right channel, he speaks his codename and password and is put through to his KGB supervisor.

Merlin informs Berounov of the latest mission developments, of the Trollos' moves, and of Mithian's betrayal. He nods as he gets his orders. “I'll do my utmost to stop the Trollos, comrade.” When the communication's over, he passes the microphone over to Arthur. As Merlin has done before him, Arthur contacts his people too.

While he does, Merlin walks away so as to allow Arthur his privacy. He'll give his partner that much, as a sign of respect. If Arthur's orders are anything like Merlin's – get the bomb and do away with your associate – they won't be in this together for long, but that doesn't mean Merlin will play it any other way than fairly.

“I'm done,” Arthur says, putting the radio apparatus back in the hard pannier and locking it.

Merlin turns around, retraces his steps. “So what are your orders?”

“I need to get to this landing point,” Arthur says, “and meet my superior officer, who will give me the rest of my instructions.”
“Me too.” Merlin was also told what to do with the bomb, what his ultimate mission goals are. He suspects it’s the same for Arthur. “Let me guess, you must get to Nisida too?”

“As a matter of fact...” Arthur widens his eyes. “Yes.”

“Then we can get there together.” Merlin climbs onto his bike and waits for Arthur to get behind him. Or at least he hopes he will come. “I mean we're still in this together until...”

Arthur’s face hardens and his lips whiten, a desolate expression shading his eyes, but he mounts on Merlin's bike, circling his arms round him. “Yes, we are. At the very least until we've stopped Giona and Caterina.”

The island-based heliport overlooks the sea while the bay of Naples faces right opposite. It's a military airstrip, fenced in by walls, wires, and electrified fences on which large rhomboidal signs warning of danger are pinned. Armed personnel moves about in twos, threes, and droves. The uniforms officers and NCOs sport are different one from the other, blue and black, and white, with sashes and medals of varied shapes and sizes, signalling they're not just Italian staff. Given the variety of gear, the soldiers securing the position seem to originate from a sizeable group of NATO countries.

Soldiers direct the lifting of cargo into planes' holds and the steering of it into hangars. Armoured vehicles move about at a jaunty speed, avoiding pedestrian traffic with glib ease.

A Bell 206 sits on the southernmost pad, its pilot already in the cockpit, its hatch open. On the runway, a man stalks forward. Unlike the personnel patrolling the strip, he's in civvies. He wears a double-breasted cotton suit ironed within an inch of its life and a pair of patent leather shoes that shine like a minor sun. From under his jacket a stiff collared shirt pokes out, around whose neck a striped tie is knotted. The man is otherwise bald, stocky; his eyebrows are pale, and his ears stand out a notch.

Merlin gasps. “I know you. You're the guy who nearly bowled Mithian into the pool at the Trollos' party.”

“Ah my other two agents.” The man puts his hand out. “Jack Ramsay Alator, CIA. You're both under my temporary command.”

Arthur and Merlin look at each other, eyebrows arched in doubt, frowns firmly in place. They eventually both salute. “Sir,” they say in unison.

“Glad to know I can still pull rank,” Alator says, as he makes for the Bell. “I think you've both gotten your directives?”

“Yes, sir.” Merlin throws his chin up.

“Affirmative.” Arthur stands taller.

“Good.” Alator waits at the foot of the Bell. “In that case hop on. We've got a couple of money hungry megalomaniacs to stop.”
Merlin and Arthur take the seats in front of the windows.

Alator sinks into the one opposite, legs apart, feet pointing outwards. Pulling his sleeve up, he glances at his wristwatch, one with a big round quadrant and a glossy leather strap. “As of now,” he says, speaking so loud he covers the sound of the rotors and the chopper taking off, “we have four hours, three minutes and thirty seven seconds to stop the Trollos from delivering the bomb into the hands of an Italian terrorist called The General, secure the Trollo stronghold and get Professor Nemeth out.”

“That's not long,” Merlin says.

Arthur leans forward and nods. “One might call it too close a window.”

“And we shouldn't forget about extricating my agent.” Alator says that lightly enough but there’s a tenseness about his body language that belies his tone.

“You have an agent of your own on the Trollos?” Arthur asks.

Merlin purses his lips. This is the first time he's heard of anyone else being on this mission. Now the KGB has been responsible for prior strings of failures, tasks that had to be aborted because of lacking funds or technology, but they generally don't forget to tell him he has potential allies on the field.

“Why would the Americans get one of their own when their British chums--” He nods at Arthur. “--are already on it?”

“No offence meant--” Alator fans his hands outwards, palms flat. “--But we couldn't leave our national security in anyone else's hands but our own.”

Merlin sets his teeth. The politburo might have its own rhetoric, but it's not as if the US government doesn't boast its own.

Arthur arches an eyebrow and says, “And yet your Yank got trapped?”

“My agent is not, as you classed it, a Yank, Pendragon.” Alator's gaze bores on them. The intensity of it makes his eyes appear smaller, faintly darker. “Not one at all.”

Merlin's head hurts with how fast thoughts circle round in his brain, fragments of ideas, sediments of intuitions. “It's Mithian.” He lifts his chin, flares his eyes. “Your agent is Mithian.”

“Sure she is.” Alator's eyes spark. “She was perfect for the job.”

“I don't exactly see how?” Arthur frowns deeply, three lines segmenting his forehead. “She's not trained.”

“She may not be,” Alator says, scrunching his mouth sideways. “But she's otherwise ideal. She's Nemeth's daughter and at the centre of things. We've long had an eye on her, ever since she was little more than a school girl. I was based in Zehlendorf myself and had occasion to watch her.” His eyes unfocus with the memory. “I soon realised she was the go to person in this case. The agency backed me. We knew that whoever wanted to contact her father would go looking for her.”

Merlin can only imagine what danger Mithian was in, with criminals wanting to get their hands on her and at least three intelligence agencies vying for her collaboration. “So you watched and waited
while her father's enemies preyed on her?"

“We recruited her as soon as we could without arousing suspicion.” Alator clears his throat into his fist. “She was eager, to say the least. She wanted a chance to see her father again. She wanted to protect him from the people who’d gotten a hold of him. She proved herself an invaluable asset and a resourceful operative.”

“But she betrayed us.” Arthur shakes his head.

“Not in so many words.”

Merlin wants to cling to the notion of her innocence. He would like to think the she was honest to him, that their moments together had something genuine in them. Yet if he believes her and he’s wrong, then he’s risking Arthur. The fate of the world too. He works his hands together and says, “I heard her. She sold us to the Trollos in so many words.”

“I'm sure you did, Ambrosov,” Alator says. “Fact is she only did because we ordered her to.”

“What!” Arthur starts. “Why in heaven's name would you do something like that!” He splutters, and his composure peels away. “It's... unconscionable. It's--It's...”

“Our only option?” Alator nudges his shoulder upwards. “The Trollos came very close to finding out exactly who you were. If they had, they would have crawled back into a hole and disappeared till they were ready to surface again to sell their bomb.” Alator clacks his teeth. “And then we wouldn't have been able to stop them in time.”

“So you risked Merlin's life?” Arthur stands. When the helicopter veers, he looses his footing and stumbles back into his seat. “And mine?”

“On behalf of the CIA, I apologise,” says Alator before pursing his lips. “Again the only way she could infiltrate the Trollos' ring was by giving you away.” He pauses and licks his lips. “Anyway, you'll be pleased to know Miss Nemeth didn't want to do it unless she could be sure you wouldn't come to harm.”

“But how could she be?” The answer comes to Merlin even before Alator answers.

“She knew she had transmitters on herself.” Alator switches his gazes from Arthur to Merlin. “She was aware you'd be listening to her every word. She made sure to voice her loyalty switch so you could be warned and get away.” Alator makes Arthur the subject of some intent scrutiny. “And once Ambrosov was free, she trusted he'd get you out too.”

“So in short you used her to get to her father!” Merlin's face and palms smart, his face tightens, and his lips bleed where he bit them. “You used her love for her family to get her to do what you wanted.”

Alator rubs his palms together. “You're making it sound way worse than it is, Ambrosov. I can assure you the girl was in on it.”

Merlin's shoulder muscles bunch up so his neck hurts. He's about to speak when one of the copilots marches in, bearing a radio device. “Sir,” he says, taking his headphones off, “communications are back on.”

“Oh good.” Alator waves the officer forwards. “Leave that here and put it on loudspeaker.”

The copilot sets the radio on the seat, disconnects the headphones, and flips a switch. When he's
done, the sounds of a conversation waft over. Heels scratch on stone and Caterina's voice echoes. “I hope everything's going well here?”

“Yes it is,” Mithian says. “My father and I spoke and he told me he was suffering from nerves before. That's what stopped him from getting on with his task.”

“Was that the problem, dear Dr Nemeth?” Caterina's voice ripples with laughter. “You should have said. We would have got you your daughter back sooner.”

“I'm fine now,” the man who must be Dr Nemeth says. “Mithian will help me.”

Hands clap together. “Capital. I trust you'll also work on the changes we agreed on?”

“Yes.” Dr Nemeth's voice strains. “The new reflector lens is on.”

On the plane Alator says, “Coupler, sends signals that allow missiles to twine with a weapon to double its destructive potential.”

Arthur blanches and Merlin balls his hands on his thighs. The Trollos truly are criminals of the highest order.

The conversation at the Trollo estate continues. “Well, we're finally speaking the same language, Dr Nemeth.” A click of the heels suggests that Caterina is walking about. “I trust then that you're done?”

“No, a few more tweaks need to be implemented.” Dr Nemeth's voice waxes into a tremble. He coughs to steady it. “To stabilise the weapon.”

Caterina Trollo tuts. “We got you your daughter and yet you're not done?”

“It's a minor adjustment needed for your own safety,” Nemeth says. “So the warhead doesn't explode as you're transporting it.”

“That would be very unfortunate.” Caterina clacks her tongue. “Yet for some reason I think you're having me on.” She snaps her fingers in a loud thwack. “Take her.”

Mithian screams; the sounds of a scuffle carry on the wireless.

Though he's aware he can't do anything from aboard the helicopter, Merlin starts towards the radio and Arthur does the same.

“Very gutsy of you, little girl, taking down two men,” Caterina Trollo says. “I'm afraid that won't cut it though.” A click resounds, short, but sharp. “Surrender or I'll be delighted to shoot you myself.”

“You can't do this,” Mithian says. “My father needs me!”

“Your father needs you as an incentive to hard work, I agree,” Caterina must have turned away from Mithian for her delivery comes across as muffled. “Lock her up in the dungeons. Be ready to kill her at my say so.”

“No!” Dr Nemeth shouts.

While the trampling of boots and the skidding of shoes suggests that someone is being dragged away rings outwards, Caterina says, “Doctor Nemeth, you have thirty minutes to make the bomb viable for use. If it's not ready for delivery then, you know what will happen.”

Alator turns the radio device off. “I guess that's how long we have to put in an intervention.”
The helicopter dips and Merlin's ears ring. “I'm ready.”

“As am I.” Arthur turns to Merlin, his jaw set and his expression oozing determination.

“Great,” Alator says, “because we're landing.”
On the Roof

The Trollo stronghold used to be a castle. It has turrets and a barbicane and it's built on top of a hill overlooking the sea. It's squat and the landwards side has no windows or terraces. Only the bay facing side has openings of any kind, but they're high up and can't be accessed. They can't storm the front entrance either. While the doors are wooden and the grate rusty, and thus easily taken down, tampering with them would alert the Trollos to their activities and risk the Nemeths' lives.

They come at the bastion from behind instead, placing explosives at the four corners of the back entrance. Flames flash upwards and into a ball. The metal portcullis comes apart; sections of it come hurtles backwards while others slash forwards.

In a dive, Arthur pulls Merlin down on the asphalt and covers his head with his palm. No debris fly their way.

Once the back access route is clear, Arthur and Merlin make for the inside. Automatic rifles drawn, they point them outwards and swing them in an arc, checking the area for potential threats. When they find none, they part ways to reconnoitre the ground perimeter. Arthur wanders through meandering vaults that interconnect in archways. They lead to mostly empty storage chambers and garages in which several armoured sedans are parked.

When they reconverge, Arthur says, “South side is clear.”

Merlin lowers his weapon. “North's side's empty.”

Pointing at the stairwell, Arthur says, “Let's see if anyone's home.”

They climb upwards, taking two flights of stairs at a run, and pass into the castle proper. Echoing stone passageways give way to white washed corridors. Brown tiling replaces gravel flooring. Neons light shine overhead in place of old wall lamps that glimmer orange. Furniture lines the walls. It's all antique, shiny with oil, but the pieces are oddly grouped together, as if they're spares someone just left there. Bypassing this part of the building, they come upon a large hall meandering into two different directions.

“I'll get the east wing,” Arthur tells Merlin. “Why don't you cover the west one?”

The sound of rotors shakes the walls and a helicopter streaks past one of the windows, heading towards the harbour.

Merlin says, “I think I'll take the roof.”

Jaw clamped, Arthur nods.

Merlin starts off at a run but Arthur calls him back. Merlin turns around and cocks his head.

Even if he doesn't want it to, not in the middle of a rescue mission, emotion grips Arthur about the heart and nearly chokes him. He says, “Watch out, will you?”

Merlin breaks into a smile. “Will do.”

Arthur watches him tear down the corridor. He feels the urge to stay put and wait until Merlin's cleared it and is no longer visible, but he knows he can't waste anytime if he wants their plan to succeed. With a nuclear bomb on the loose and people in danger, he can't allow himself room for
mistakes, or sentimentality. Even so, he experiences a reluctance to move, tear away, that makes his
legs heavy and roots them to the spot.

With a shake of the head, he snatches out of it and hurries headlong down the corridor. As he pushes
on, he meets a guard whom he shoots in the knee. For a stretch he jogs backwards to make sure the
man won't fire at him when he isn't looking. When it becomes clear the guard is no position to give
in to reprisals, cradling his injured joint as he is, Arthur spins round and dashes towards the west
wing.

He moves past empty salons and small quadrangular chambers. He passes doors of reinforced steel
and the mouth of stairwells leading both up and downstairs. Eventually, he reaches the last room in
the wing. It butts into the rock-face and has no outward facing window. A set of vault doors guards
it, but they stand open.

Rifle up, Arthur enters the room. Ready to shoot, he swipes the weapon from side to side, but clocks
no targets. Step by careful step, he edges toward the worktable. Propped on it is a metal stand. Four
sets of brackets depart from its body and curve inwards at the top. “Like a cradle,” Arthur says. “For
the bomb.”

The cradle itself is empty.

“Shit,” Arthur says as he moves along the work station. Papers full of calculations, mass of
equations, clutter it. Test tubes stand upright along the length of its surface. Battery eliminators, coils
of Eureka wire, and Geiger counters sit next to them. The counters’ pointers show the needles
pointing up a few notches on the grid. More proof the bom was here. Once he's moved past the work
station, he stumbles to a halt.

A man lies on the floor. He's middle-aged, silver haired, his features symmetrical if square with age.
A pair of broken glasses sits on his sweaty face and his shirt is red with a blooming of blood. His
chest rises and falls though.

“Dr Nemeth.” Arthur rushes to him, placing a hand on his torso to stench the blood flow. “Dr
Nemeth, can you hear me?”

“Mithian,” Dr Nemeth whispers. “You must save Mithian.”

“We're here for that, Dr Nemeth.” Arthur's palms get crimson fast. “Where's the bomb?”

“Caterina--” Nemeth coughs and Arthur cradles his head against it hitting the floor. “She has it. She's
flown to her meeting point. To sell it.” He grits his teeth, his lip curling in a grimace of pain. “But
Mithian... Giona has Mithian.”

Though Arthur can't be sure, he says, “My colleague, Merlin, will save her.”

“You--” Nemeth grabs Arthur by his shirt. “You must go too. Mithian...”

“I've got to radio command and get help for you,” Arthur says, clasping Nemeth's hand tight.

“No, there's no time.” Nemeth shakes his head. “You must help my daughter.”

Arthur brings his walkie-talkie to his mouth. “Eagle, Here's Caliburnus, do you read me?”

“Copy, Caliburnus, we hear you,” Alator answers.

“I need paramedics at the Trollo stronghold for Doctor Nemeth.” Arthur watches Dr Nemeth's
clammy face and hopes they will get to him in time. “And I need you to locate Caterina Trollo for me. She has the bomb.” Arthur lets go of the push to talk switch. “I repeat she has the bomb.”

“Roger that, Caliburnus.” Static replaces Alator's voice as he relays his orders elsewhere. “We've got it, Caliburnus. Expect aid in five.”

“Thanks, Eagle,” Arthur says, belting his walkie. “Heard that, Dr Nemeth? Help's on the way.”

Dr Nemeth grabs Arthur by the collar and forces him forwards so their faces lie closer. “I won't--” His breath rasps outwards. “I won't rest easy until I know my...” He bites back a cough. “...my daughter is safe. I can wait for help alone. I don't need you for that.”

Arthur looks to the door. While the room is empty, Arthur can't be sure it'll remain so, that no Trollo goon will come back and finish what they started. In the condition he's in Dr Nemeth can't possibly defend himself. If Arthur left him behind and something happened, he could never forgive himself.

“Merlin's quite good at what he does. He's a top notch agent and he's a friend of Mithian's too. You can trust her safety to him.”

“Please,” Dr Nemeth says, his hold on Arthur weakening. “Please.”

“All right.” Arthur disengages Nemeth's hand from his. “I will.”

The corners of Nemeth's mouth quiver into a wan smile.

Arthur stands, hesitates.

Nemeth's pierces him with his weighted gaze.

Tamping down on all qualms, Arthur skids off to a run. He takes the stairs to the roof two at a time, bounding upwards without looking where his feet go. He's one flight short of the top, when a footfall echoes down the well. Arthur flattens himself against the curvature of the wall, shy of the angle, and when the guard clears it, Arthur hits him in the face with the butt of his rifle. The guard grunts, kicks outwards, searching his belt for his holster. He slings his gun out, swinging it towards Arthur. Arthur grabs the pistol by the barrel and smashes the guard's wrist against the wall.

Grunting, the guard loses his grip and drops the pistol. With a kick Arthur sends it skittering into the distance. Wide eyed at his weaponless status, the guard swings at Arthur and connects a punch. As the guard bends his arm to land another, Arthur wheels his head round, and deals two blows of his own, one to the guard's belly, which winds him, the other to his throat. This one stuns the guard enough for Arthur to use his momentum against him. Gripping him by the shoulders, Arthur wrenches him forwards and sends him flying down the stairs.

The man rolls down the steps shoulders first and impacts the landing with a dull thud. Face down, body in a sprawl, he doesn't move.

Arthur turns his back to him and runs towards the roof.

He kicks open the door leading to it and, weapon up, stops short.

Giona Trollo and Mithian are on the parapet, a step away from free-fall. Giona has his gun pointed at Mithian's neck, his arm around her collar.

Merlin is halfway between Arthur and the other two, one leg bent forward, the other arrow straight. He cradles a gun he points at Giona. “Let Mithian go, Giona,” Merlin says.
“And then what?” Giona screams. “You send me to prison?”

“You'll be treated with much more leniency if you don't kill Mithian.” Merlin shouts the words over the din of the wind, which, up on the roof, howls with more of a punch than it does at ground level. “If you harm her, we won't take it kindly.”

Giona shifts, the gun's muzzle trembling where it touches Mithian's skin. “No, I can't give up. Caterina wouldn't like it.”

“Caterina is a criminal.” Merlin's fingers are tense around the trigger. “Nothing more.”

“She's my wife!” Giona empties his lungs into the air. “I can't betray her!”

“Didn't she betray you when she used your family fortune to fund her criminal activities?” Merlin inches forwards. It's not by much, the movement so subtle it almost can't be detected, but he's shifting angles so he can aim clear at Giona without impacting Mithian. “Didn't she let you down when she did that?”

“I love her!” Giona trembles, tightening his grip on Mithian, causing her to hiss, sink her nails into his forearm. “I married her. Caterina can have everything that's mine.”

“All right, yes.” Merlin puts his weight on his back leg. “That's what marriage is. But is she doing the same for you?” Merlin's jaw line tenses. “Is what she's doing good for you too?”

“She promised she would use my name to make us great!”

“But is that what she's doing?” Merlin asks. “Or is she only with you for your money?”

Giona's shoulders slump and his face splits into a grimace. It's a desperate, anguished expression, eyes wide and bloodshot. He quakes, his motions getting choppy, the gun wavering in his hand.

First on the chin, then in quick repetition, in the stomach, Mithian elbows him.

Giona stumbles, but lifts his gun.

At the same time as Merlin pulls the trigger, Arthur shoots. The shots ricochet in the night and blood stains Giona's white shirt. His jacket ripples in the wind. His mouth goes slack. Lips agape, he stumbles backwards and falls off the parapet.

As Mithian runs towards the access door, a helicopter surfaces above the line of the roof, hovering sideways off the parapet, rotors revolving fast. Gripping a safety handle, Alator leans out the open cabin compartment. “Come on, snap to it!” He waves them on board with his arm. “We've still got Caterina to stop.”

Merlin and Arthur jog towards the parapet and, rifles slung around their necks, leap onto the chopper.

Mithian stays behind. “My father,” she shouts over the deafening sound of the aircraft's engine. “Caterina had him shot. I must get back to him. I must save him.”

Alator cuts a horizontal line in the hair with the flat of his hand. “Dr Nemeth has just been air lifted to the closest hospital. He's gonna be okay.”

Mithian doesn't move.

“Oh come on,” Alator yells. “We've got a nuclear bomb to track.”
With a nod, Mithian runs toward the circling helicopter and takes a leap for its skids.

Merlin catches one of her hands and Arthur the other.
On the Bridge

Flags waving in a go signal, they land on an aircraft carrier. The helicopter lowers itself face first, then its slides touch ground. The landing strip is larger than Merlin had thought it would be, angled left so jets can take off and land at the same time, and abutting to sea. On the centre line white painted stripes radiate outwards at ten degree intervals; other markings stand out in yellow, one following after the other in long segments. Petrol patches shine on in pools at the foot of jets and heavy machinery. Personnel in overalls move about, carrying tool boxes, lengths of steel cable, clipboards. They wear headphones against the noise and radios hang at their belts. Wide antennae fixed to the composite mast pivot round to catch radio signals.

As they hop down, Arthur smells the air and flattens a hand on his heart. “Ah, I missed this.”

“You navy men,” Merlin says, trying to find his legs. It's not that he can feel the roll and pitch of the waves on such a big ship as the one they're on, but he can't say he feels at home on the thing. The wind hits him too strongly and he can barely hear his own voice. The vast horizon is staggeringly blue all around. It disorientates him, dizzies him. As an army man, he's never had to spend a day on a ship. His experience is limited to sleeping rough in forests, seeing the inside of panzers, and sitting for hours on top of knolls while waiting for the enemy to show even an inch on of body surface so he could calibrate the shot. “You're really weird.”


Merlin rolls his eyes. “A little bit of queasiness is not seasickness.”

As Arthur and Merlin speak under their breath, Mithian lifts her gaze heavenwards and rattles out a long suffering sigh.

She's barely let it all out, when an officer in blues strides over and salutes them.

The officer says, “If you'd care to follow me, sirs, ma'am.”

Trailing him across the flight deck, they climb over cords of steel cable and large hooks, avoiding moving cranes and forklifts. Cutting across the mission bay, they pass a thick metal door, descend a set of ladders, and come upon a long corridor. Lights shine overhead and reflect off the grey paint of the partitions. Steam and electrical valves with switches stick out of the wall, buttons and slots at their base. They flash with multi-coloured lights. At a clop they reach a section of webbed corridors. They climb again and come to a space facing aft. A stacks of radios covers one wall, beeping red lights going on and off, indicating that the apparatus is receiving in-coming signal traffic.

The bridge is a large cabin fronted by glass on three sides; it perches directly over the deck and affords a view of the choppy blue sea. Only in the distance the flat of the bay's shoreline shows, promontories guarding the sands between.

The officer escorting them stops before a uniformed officer, who hulks at the centre of a gaggle of high ranking personnel. “Admiral Shallott,” he says, standing at attention. “You're guests have arrived.”

The admiral turns around. “Ah, Alator.” He bestows Merlin, Mithian and Arthur a glance. “And your field agents.”

Arthur stands rigidly, his chest out. Mithian drops her arms. As for Merlin, he eyes the premises warily. It's not often that he gets to stand shoulder to shoulder with American officers. While Alator's
one, he's CIA, and thus the kind of rival Merlin's used to. They're all in the same game. Plain military
are another matter entirely, much more straight forward, and going by a different set of rules. He
supposes, given the kind of unparalleled access he's been given, he should do as much data gathering
as possible, so as to be able to pass it on to Moscow. But even though he probably ought, he's in no
mood to play spy. He's got other issues to think about and it's not as if he owes Berounov and his
hounds any particular devotion. More, he wouldn't do this to Arthur. There's some kind of implicit
trust there he doesn't want to break.

“I hear you have a problem with a stray atom bomb?” the Admiral says.

“As a matter of fact we do.” Alator thrusts his chest out as though enough bluster will cover his –
their – failings. “We're also on the look out for Caterina Trollo.”

“Follow me, will you?” the Admiral gestures them forwards, towards a large stack of monitors: a
sonar, radar, and satellite imaging device. “None of our readings alert us to the presence of a nuclear
device.”

Mithian steps forward. “While I was being taken to the dungeons, I heard Caterina tell my father not
to arm the bomb.”

“You mean it's not nuclearised?” Merlin asks.

“Not at the moment, I don't think so.” Mithian shakes her head from one side to the other, the motion
sharp, decisive. “She said she meant to travel with the bomb. So she wanted to be safe. She wanted
my father to instruct her on how to activate it herself.”

“And did he?” Arthur asks.

“Yes.” Mithian nods. “He started to while I was still in the room.”

“So if this is correct,” Merlin tells the roomful. “We could stop her anyway we want to.”

“Yes.” The admiral studies the wall chart. “But without a nuclear trail to follow locating your Mrs
Trollo won't be easy.”

“Actually, I think it won't be so hard.” Mithian's eyes spark.

“She left the Trollo stronghold via helicopter.” Alator's face darkens. “She could be anywhere by
now.”

“Not really.” Mithian meets each of their gazes in turn. “She didn't seem keen on carrying the bomb
around, armed or not.”

“Which means,” Arthur says, taking his cue from her, “that she wouldn't have chosen to fly it about
either.”

Merlin is quite certain he knows where this is going; the kernel of an idea forms clearer and clearer in
his brain. “And she's the owner of a shipyard.”

“She'd have preferred one of her own ships, of course,” Arthur says, his eyes gleaming. “She'd only
have used the helicopter to take her to the harbour.”

“She'll meet her buyer at sea.” Mithian arches an eyebrow at the sonar. “She's on a boat.”

The admiral gives off a raspy laugh. “Have you any idea how many vessels are at sea this time of
year?” When they all signal that they don't, the admiral adds, “Hundreds, that's how many. I don't see how I can locate one single piece of craft if you don't give me more.”

“I think there's a way to locate the Trollo boat,” Arthur says. “I'm sure she has at least one vessel to her own name.”

“We can check with the coast guard.” Alator moves towards the radio. “That's a matter of mere minutes.”

While Alator is busy at the radio, Arthur, Merlin and Mithian watch the sonar. Merlin can't be sure about the other two, but he's wondering which of the dots corresponds to the piece of naval craft Caterina is on. He burns with the desire to know. It's an itch that's becoming keener and keener. Caterina must be stopped, for what she tried to do to Arthur and for what she intends to do to the world.

When Alator is done with the comms console, he says, “Giona's father, Massimo Trollo, had a yacht; it's called The Changeling and it's part of Giona's inheritance. I've verified with Baiae harbour. The Changeling has left its berth today.”

“Based on their radio signals you can get their bearings, right?” Merlin remembers something of the kind happening when he was in the army. They located a van full of contraband weapons that were being smuggled into the Ukraine by using their communications as a way to triangulate their position. It didn't end prettily, but they succeeded. “You can pin them down.”

“Well, I have an idea.” Merlin sees Mithian smile at him and he's fairly certain that she's sussed out his plan. “We get Arthur to radio her. They have--” Merlin gives Arthur a light smirk. “--A fraught relationship. There are loose ends between them and Caterina likes to be always right, much like Arthur does--” Merlin ignores Arthur's stuttered denials. “I'm sure that, given the right incentive, she'll talk.”

“I don't know,” the Admiral says, frowning so much thick furrows line his brow. “This is based on conjecture.”

“Let me try.” Arthur steps forward. “Merlin may not be right in his assessment of me, but I do think he's got Caterina down pat. It's surely worth a shot.”

“Well…” Alator studies Arthur keenly. “…I guess it is.”

Arthur takes the radio microphone from the ensign. “How long do I have to get her to talk before we can triangulate her position?”

“At least five minutes.” The ensign nods at the operator. “The longer the better.”

“Will do.” Arthur pushes a button and a crackle sounds. “Changeling, this USS Massachusetts. I repeat, this is USS Massachusetts.”

“They're not picking up.” The Admiral casts a weary glance at the radar.

“Try a more personal approach,” Mithian says, tugging on Arthur's sleeve. “She's the kind to take it much more to heart.”

Arthur nods and brings the microphone back to his mouth. “Caterina, hi, this is me, Arthur Pendragon. I know you're listening, so I'll just drone on, I suppose. You'll remember me; you tried to
have me tortured and killed.” Arthur looks to Mithian and Mithian gives him a bob of the head. “I just wanted to say that your plan's failed. We have Doctor Nemeth, we saved his daughter, and I killed your husband.”

Silence fills the room. Arthur shares glances with Merlin and Mithian and purses her lips. Shaking his head, Arthyr gazes at the microphone. It looks as though he's wondering whether he should pick it up again or try another tack.

“We're wasting our time,” the admiral says.

For the first time Merlin agrees with him. He doesn't know what sort of person Caterina is deep down, what moves her aside from a desire to become richer and more powerful, no matter what laws she breaks. He has no idea whether taunting her is the way to get to her. What he does know is that their plan is failing. At the notion Merlin's blood runs cold and his stomach gives. He feels light as a feather, insubstantial, panic bearing him on in a wave, scattering him to the winds.

If he goes back to Moscow empty handed, with the mission botched, then he may very well end up black-listed. And while he can easily imagine the cold grey Lubyanka cell they'll give him, it's not that that worries him. They'll take his mother. They'll knock on her door, two men, in plain clothes, with threadbare jackets hiding the bulge of a gun. They'll ask her politely to come with, their tone bureaucratic. They'll tell her to pack her things they'll shift their weight and when she hesitates, they'll let her see their weapon. They'll walk her to their grey sputtering volga and she'll disappear, no longer to be seen, just like Merlin's father. At the thought Merlin's heart rattles. On top of that the nuclear threat Caterina would pose if she sold the bomb threatens to become even more real.

“You must go full throttle, Pendragon,” Alator says. “If we're playing this game you gotta make her angry.”

Arthur gives him a head bob, and his eyes light up and he continues speaking into the microphone. “I'd like to say Giona was a valiant opponent, that he acted with some kind of honour, but I'm afraid he didn't. By the end of it he was begging for mercy. It wasn't a nice sight. Not at all. I'd rather he hadn't made as much of a fuss. Quite cowardly of him in fact.”

The sound of return static gives way to that of heavy breathing.

“You were right, Pendragon,” Caterina says, her tone controlled, but oozing spite at the edges. “I was listening. Thank you for keeping me up to date as to my husband's demise. Giona wasn't perhaps decisive, but he was indeed worth ten of you.”

“Does she even care?” the Admiral murmurs. “I feel like we've flubbed this.”

Caterina says, “Because you've deprived me of such a beloved, faithful companion, you're going to pay, Pendragon. I'm going to do away with your family. Then I'll start on your friends. They'll meet a very bloody end, rest assured. I think I may prey on your father first. When I'm done with that--”

The sound of a cackle comes through the microphone. “--I swear I'll come for everyone else tied to you. That silly little biddy of the Nemeth girl. I'll gladly string her up with my own hands.”

Mithian takes Merlin's hand. Her palm is sweaty, slippery, but Merlin clamps on it and hopes it'll give her strength. He knows he needs it to. He wishes to give her something of him, to help her. In return the warmth of her seeps into his bones and looses the knot of fear Caterina's lack of response generated.
“And that fellow agent of yours,” Caterina says, over the tinny sound of the radio. “Rest assured that he's going to die both slowly and painfully. I'll do it myself. Just for the fun of it. As payback for Giona.” Her voice cracks. “For every moment my husband suffered he's going to go through worse. Tit for tat. A dear one for a dear one.” Venom seeps through her tone. “You know just how ruthless I am, how good I am at making people wish they weren't born. Don't mistake me, Pendragon, I'll be your nemesis.”

The ensign darts towards the sonar monitor. His eyes glide along a string of data and he gestures with his hands at Arthur, indicating he should continue talking.

“Bearing 05-4, Admiral,” the ensign says, showing his logs to his superior.

Caterina says, “You'll watch them suffer and there's nothing you'll be able to do to put a stop to that. You'll look on powerless to do anything at all, to interfere in any way.” A kind of deranged glee suffuses her tone. “And when it's all over with them, you'll start fearing for your own life, because you know I'll come for you too. You'll just have to wonder when and how. Bask in the fear of that. Because I swear I will kill you, Arthur Pendragon, I will. And when I'm finished with you, I'll raze the world to the ground. This is a solemn promise.”

“We have her,” the ensign says. On his monitor a dot flashes, concentric circles radiating outwards from its centre. “Down to her cruising speed.”

“Well, I guess it's for you to give the order admiral,” Alator says, his eyes slitting with determination. “The ship's yours.”

His uniform shoes clopping on the deck, the admiral walks over to his ordnance officer. He hands him his keys. “Proceed at my command.”

Arthur tells Caterina, “Your plan isn't as sound as you might think.”

She scoffs. “How so? Tell me, how am I going to fail given that I hold all the winning cards?”

“While you went on and on about your destructive power--” Arthur's face turns grim, the tendons at his neck standing out in ropes. “--we've been zeroing on your radio signal.”

Caterina makes a startled noise. “You can do that?”

“Oh course we can do that.” Arthur huffs. “Technology, Caterina. It’s a thing. I thought you knew considering how hell bent you were to kidnap scientists.”

Mithian starts at that and Merlin has to hold her to stop her from bursting forward and snatching the microphone from Arthur.

“It doesn't matter anyway,” Caterina says. “I'll be off this boat in five minutes, off to deliver the bomb and then I'll have won.”

Arthur shakes his head. “We have an accurate reading of your position, Caterina.” He looks to the wide horizon, the sparkling sea. With all the white flecks creasing it lightly it looks idyllic. “Within ten feet.”

“I have the bomb with me.” Caterina screeches this. “You can't target me or it'll go off. You'll cause a nuclear explosion right off the coast of Italy.”

“Hitting you won't trigger a nuclear explosion.” Arthur doesn't say that smugly but levelly, matter of factly. “You disarmed your weapon, remember, Caterina? And an atom warhead needs fission to
actually cause a nuclear blast.”

“You can't take that risk!” Caterina shouts over the static sound of the radio. “You can't”

“I'm sorry, Caterina,” Arthur says. “As much as it pains me, you do deserve what you're getting.”

“Thirty seconds to impact.” The ensign puts on headphones. “Twenty seconds to impact...”

As Merlin turns around, he looks at the large deck windows. They afford a view of a vast swath of Mediterranean. A ball of fire leaps high on the horizon, tinting it orange and crimson, like a sunset, releasing a cloud of black smoke that curls towards the white clouds skimming the sea.

For some, Merlin wagers, death is no more than a shower of smoulder ashes raining down on waves. For others it's a cold grave buried under blankets of thick, dirty snow. Either way it's final, the closing of a chapter that will never be opened again.

“She's gone,” Mithian says, breathing out. “She's gone.”
At the Hotel degli Archibugi

Rome, Italy, (41°53'30.95" N 12°30'40.79" E), 1 December 1962

The street is pebbled and climbs up hill. On one side of it an old Roman Wall extends; on the other the Tiber unfurls, its waters churning forward in pools of a murky brown. The pavement is barely raised, its stone worked smooth by the constant treading. It's narrow of girth but Arthur sticks to it because Vespas zip past wildly on the carriageway, overtaking each other, winding this way and that in less than linear trajectories. The path leads him under an arch and into a narrow lane lined with small shops on the side. Arthur walks past a grocer exhibiting aluminium tins together with chunks of pink prosciutto on their shelves, a philatelic shop, displaying rows of blue, gold and pink postal stamps as old as the old the Vatican's state, and a small printer whose window is bare of anything but notices plastered to the glass. He enters the fifth shop in the line up.

It's twenty square metres all around, which are cut across by a wide wooden counter.

Arthur steps up to it and says, “I telephoned earlier about a Leika.”

“Oh yes,” the shopkeeper says, “I couldn't find the exact same model you wanted. That's old, from before the war. But I've located a 3F whose features are not too dissimilar to the one you were looking for.”

“You can’t do anything about getting the one I need, can you?” Arthur's shoulders drop. When he talked to front desk girl at the hotel the morning before, she said that this was the place to go if he wished to buy a hard to find camera. He's been hoping ever since then. “May I see this other camera?”

“Of course,” the shop-keeper says. “I'll be right back with it.

The man disappears behind a small, white-painted door. The light in the annex room comes on. Sounds of objects being shifted waft through to the main floor and the door creaks on its hinges. Just when Arthur thinks the shopkeeper will shut it, he instead re-emerges holding a box. He places it on the counter and takes out a camera. It's small, black and silver, very compact.

The shopkeeper says, “It has 1/1,000 second shutter speed, a longer rangefinder base length compared to older models and is very easy to handle.”

Arthur fears it's too easy to. Unlike the other Leika, it looks highly portable, light too, but it doesn't ooze any charm at all. “I was looking for something more old-fashioned.”

“Your request is quite specific, sir, and very hard to fulfil.” The shop keeper hands him the Leika. “This camera is one of the best on the market at the moment.”

“I see.” Arthur lifts it and looks into the view finder. He fiddles with dials and levers. He must say the zoom on this thing is quite good. “What's the price for this?”

“Seven hundred thousand and fifty seven lires, sir,” the shopkeeper tells him. “The price is of course reflective of the quality of the product.”

Arthur places the camera back on the counter. “I'll take it.”
It's twilight by the time Arthur makes it back to his hotel room. Shadows envelop one corner of the room, while closer to the balcony light paints a wedge of brightness on the floor. Some of its halo limns the shape of the man sitting in his armchair, painting his legs and torso silver.

“You can turn on the light.” Arthur hangs his jacket on a peg and places the box on the side table. “I know it's you.”

“The darkness was helping me think.” Merlin doesn't even move.

“I suppose you had the same order as me,” Arthur says, sitting on the edge of the bed, close to the open suitcase lying on it. “And that that's what you were mulling over.”

“Yes.” Merlin shifts forward a little and part of his face comes out of the shadows. “It's quite a lot to think about, you'll admit.”

Arthur can't say that it isn't. “Before you make a decision, I have something for you. It's on that table.”

Merlin stands. “I'm not going to kill you, you know.”

“I'm not going to either.” Arthur doesn't care what his superiors say, whether they consider his disobeying a deal-breaking infraction that gets him ousted. They can't force him to kill someone in cold blood, no matter if he's Russian, and vying for access to Dr Nemeth. Arthur won't off a man posing no threat to his country other than belonging to a rival power. “Rest assured.”

“I think I knew that.” Merlin takes a step forward.

“So given that we're not doing each other in, it's back to business as usual now.” Arthur stands. He doesn't exactly meet Merlin in the middle, but crosses some of the space between them. “To how things were before the mission began.”

“Minus the nuclear threat,” Merlin says. “Hopefully.”

“So are you going to fly back to Moscow?”


“Off to London tomorrow.” Where Arthur will have to explain himself. Then he'll have to help his father come clean, get him out of the mess his less than legal dealings have put him in, and make sure nobody will ever have something to hold over him ever again. It won't be easy to persuade Father to adopt a more honest course of action, but, he won't stand for underhandedness, for being the heir to a legacy tarnished with it. He will have to make it clear to his father. “And then I suppose I'll be off on another mission.”

“Same here.” Merlin toes at the carpet with his boot.

“Before you go,” Arthur says, moving closer to Merlin yet, “I want you to see what I got you.”

“Right the box on the table.” Merlin shifts sideways so he gets to the three legged stand. “I remember.”

“I know it can't replace the one you lost.” Arthur needs to say that he understands that, that he's not as insensitive as to think his offering can be anything other that a stop gap. He can only hope that Merlin will see it as it is intended, as some manner of consolation for a privation that can't be remedied. “But I hope you can enjoy it in the future all the same.”
Merlin lifts the box’s flap and takes out Arthur's present. “It's a camera. Same brand as my dad's.” His head snaps up. “Arthur, you shouldn't have.”

“We're going to part ways.” Arthur doesn't like the idea of it. At the notion a clutch of pain seizes his heart in fact. “I hope we don't do it as enemies.”

Merlin puts the camera back in its box, which he sets on the table, then he marches over to Arthur, bridging the last of the gap between them. “I know we should be,” Merlin says. “But I don't feel we are.”

Neither does Arthur, but he isn't sure he has the words to explain the ways in which he thinks they're not. “I know.”

“I shouldn't feel this way.” Merlin meets his gaze and doesn't drop it, not for a second. “But I do and I won't push it all under the carpet.”

Arthur wants to ask what Merlin means, but he realises that doing so would equate to burning bridges, setting them on fire the same way as his heart is. So he only swallows.

“They take and take,” Merlin says, fists balled. “They shouldn't have this too.”

Arthur doesn't need Merlin to clarify. “No, we can be--” His throat hurts at the thought of saying it but he pushes the words out. “Friends.”

Merlin reaches his hand out, palm open.

Arthur grasps it, palm to palm, and the warmth of Merlin's mollifies his bones. “I, well, I--”

Gaze travelling from their joined hands to Arthur's face, Merlin's eyes widen with the deep startle of a revelation, changing in hue as the light hits them. He darts forward and brushes his lips against Arthur's, soft, close lipped.

The shock of it makes Arthur's heart contract in hefty spasms, sends him reeling so he can barely tell up from down, or sort out whether this is wise or wholly crazy. You don't sleep with other spies, you don't lower your guard, especially not when the person you want to have sex with comes from the other side of the iron curtain, when he's someone playing a game that lies completely at odds with yours.

Given Arthur's failure to respond, Merlin hesitates, draws back a notch, so Arthur can no longer sense his touch. Bereft in a way that empties his body of precious matter, Arthur pulls him back.

His lips move softly against Merlin's in a pattern of press and release that softens Arthur's bones and addles his thoughts. His tongue dips between Merlin's parted lips and Arthur kisses him slowly, more and more deeply, with an intent he's scared of.

Merlin kisses back too, touching tongues, making free with Arthur's mouth, nipping at his lips with his, rubbing them with his, until Arthur's mouth fattens with the contact, tingles with it.

Fabric snatching under his fingers, Arthur's hands drop to Merlin's hips, drift round his back, to his shoulders. He rests his palms on the back of Merlin's head, where the hair's at it shortest, spikiest, cradling him close.

Merlin leans into him, his lips touching Arthur's with insistence, all tongue and teeth and wetness. He chases small nibbling kisses along the length of Arthur's upper lip, which he follows upon with deep, hungry kisses, that delve deep in his mouth. Arthur goes dizzy with them, his head lightens, and his
thoughts scatter to the winds. This is brilliant. It's energising. It feeds his heart so it grows in size. No matter what risk this entails, he won't give this up. They might only have a night of it, Arthur not so foolish as to think they have any hope for more, but he'll take it.

"Merlin." His chest hurts with the commotion of feelings inside it. "Merlin."

Merlin's gaze goes dark, with shades of lust in it, and oddly meaningful, loaded with emotion. "Arthur."

At sight of the depths of Merlin's expression, Arthur trembles and his eyes fall shut. Merlin kisses the corners of his lips and Arthur can't catch his breath because of it. He stifles a gasp but he's not sure he succeeds. He buries it deep down in his lungs and they start to hurt almost as much as his heart does. Arthur turns his face blindly into Merlin's and lets their heir lips match, graze each other into opening once more. Desire blisters through him, under skin and into bone. He kisses Merlin's chin, his jaw line, his neck. Merlin's breath on him is hot and damp. The fanning of it sends shivers up Arthur's spine.

So he wraps Merlin close, noses his skin, fingers his hair from nape to skull. His hands plane down his arms, moving to his waist, settling briefly there, before they pace the breadth of Merlin again. It makes Merlin shiver. It makes him shift closer.

Arthur nuzzles at his neck. He rakes a hand up Merlin's back, then, burning for a real touch, he slips it under the hem of his crew neck jumper, stroking skin. It's hot, fever so, a little damp in places, flexing under the grazing of Arthur's palm.

With a few tugs he tries to pull off Merlin's top, but it's a tight fitting one, and doing so one-handed doesn't come easy. He steps back, watching Merlin steadily, arching an eyebrow.

His mouth creasing at the corners, Merlin grips the hem of his jumper and pulls it over his head.

His chest rising and falling, Arthur breathes hard. Merlin looks great. Lean and nicely built, with a grace to him that has little of the military about it, yet with a sparsity that speaks of a life on the move, that of a spy. Moved by a deep-seated need for Merlin, Arthur strips his shirt off too, doing quick work of the buttons, snapping a few of them in the bargain, Savile Row be damned.

They come together again, kissing and touching each other, fingers tightening around forearms, around the arc of bones, pushing and pulling, skimming and grabbing.

Walking backwards Arthur backs against the bed; he pushes his suitcase off it, and lands them on the mattress, Merlin under him.

Their mouths open to each other, tongues dipping in and out of each others' mouths. Merlin’s hands brand his back, palm flat, his legs wedging open so Arthur can fit between them. He does. He feels like he belongs, like his body has found its groove. Arthur trails his touch along Merlin's torso, dragging his mouth along the paths his palms have traced, pressing his lips against Merlin's throat, meandering them down to the rise of the collarbones, the softness of his nipples.

Moving lower, Arthur bumps his tongue along the ridges of Merlin's stomach; he sucks and tastes the taste of salt off Merlin's skin, lick against the grain of it. Merlin gulps in a breath and Arthur puts kisses to the lines of his muscles, the dips and divots between bone and skin, the patterns of him.

Because he won't get a do over, he wants to memorize Merlin's body, learn the shape and heft of it. Merlin has lean hips whose bone juts sharply outwards, long arms that seem to be all elbow but that do spike at the bicep and lean thighs pale from Russian winters. There's more to take in, more to him,
of course, but there's only so much time to memorise the ins and outs of Merlin, and Arthur wants this to get somewhere too.

None too shy, Merlin studies him back. He palms Arthur's side, runs his hands down the length of his back, fits them around his buttocks. When Arthur thrusts, he arches into him with twisting motions of his lower body.

Needing to push things along, Arthur unbuttons Merlin's trousers. Free, his cock pokes out of a layer of under wear, cotton, white, faded, the elastic brittle in places. He hooks his fingers around their hemline, pulling it lower, where it snags at the shank. He takes Merlin's cock into his mouth, dampening it at the tip first, sucking it in deep and long next. The musky smell of Merlin is deep in his nostril; it excites his blood to a thrill.

Merlin grips Arthur's shoulders, tightens his legs around his torso, arches up, and flips them. Breathing hard, grinning, he says, “Weren't--” His chest fills and caves. “--Expecting that, were you?”

Arthur hadn't, but that doesn't mean he's going to admit it. “So what are you going to do from your new vantage point?”

Merlin bends low over him, murmurs the words in his ears. “I'm going to--” He takes Arthur's earlobe in his mouth. “--introduce you to Russian sex.”

Though his body strains with expectation, libido, lust, Arthur laughs. “And how is it different from plain old British sex?”

Merlin buries his smile in Arthur's neck. “You'll see.”

The truth is Arthur does want to see.

They strip each other of the rest of their clothing, kissing and touching while they do so, bridging any distance between them with a clutch of their bodies. They touch and roll, tangle together, a knot of limbs and nudity and warmth.

Eventually, Merlin rises above him, straddling his legs, placing his hands on him in long, smooth strokes. He draws a pattern of lines on Arthur's skin, carves them with his palm till Arthur burns with them, till they shape him in brand new ways. He bends and kisses Arthur, soft and slow, and presses the heels of his hands along his flanks, into the depth of his shoulder muscles, into the meat of his arms. He finds Arthur's scars with the pad of his fingers, traces them with the soft part of his lips. He asks, “Did you get these in the line of duty?”

Arthur kisses Merlin's shoulder, where the ridge of a scar of his own tickles his lips. “Did you?”

“No answer.” Merlin grabs his face with his hand. As he looks into Arthur's eyes his lips quirk. “Evasion, very fitting.”

“As long as it's not a state secret,” Arthur says, breathless with the truthfulness of what he's about to say, “you can know everything about me.”

Head at a tilt, Merlin studies him for long seconds, his gaze boring past the surface of Arthur and deep into him. “I'll never harm you, you know.” He kisses Arthur, softening his lips around his. “Whatever sort of orders they give me.”

Arthur touches Merlin's face, brushes back his hair, mouths at his cheek. He widens his legs and looks Merlin deep in the eyes. Merlin rolls forward and his cock nudges up against Arthur. It's easy
wanting it then, easy wishing Merlin would push forward, would just enter him, giving him the shock of pleasure Arthur craves so strongly his mouth is dry with it. "Merlin."

Merlin brushes his lips on Arthur's nose, smudges them along the arc of his cheekbone. “What with?”

“In my suitcase."

Merlin leans over, roots in it. He finds the bottle and uncaps it. His fingers are wet with its contents. He reaches between them and slicks Arthur up. Arthur frowns, grunts against the blunt presence, against the spark of pleasure it lights. He takes his own cock in hand and bears down on Merlin's hand in short snaps. Every time he does, air puffs out of his mouth, and sobs tickle at his vocal cords.

His cock is leaking at the tip by the time Merlin enters him. He pushes in by increments, pacing himself, the width of him stretching Arthur as he goes. He keens as he edges deeper, breathing slow breaths into the curve of Arthur's neck. As he weathers the burn of it, Arthur sucks in air through his nostrils, focuses on Merlin, the smell of him, the warmth of him as he blankets Arthur. When the dull ache of it has decreased, he roams his hand up Merlin's hip and pulls him in, causing him to fit in to the hilt.

Their gazes lock and they're frozen in the moment. Arthur blinking, Merlin gaping. They don't kiss. They scarcely breathe. Then Merlin rolls his hips, withdraws and enters Arthur again.

To gives himself leverage to respond, Arthur flattens his feet on the mattress. He bucks. His thighs cord. His cock thickens, hurts with the fullness of it. As Merlin pulls in and out, Arthur touches himself from base to tip. It's overwhelming. It's blistering.

Pleasure comes in alternate waves, from the touch of his own hand, the friction of it, and from Merlin's pulling in and out. Arthur pushes back against him, seeks the fullness of Merlin, forces him deeper and deeper. His back rises off the bed, shoulders bearing the brunt of much of his weight.

With little huffs, Merlin sinks in to the hilt, pulls back, accidentally slips all the way out. He uses his hands to fit himself inside again, then homes forward on a thrust that has no tempo.

They grunt in unison. Arthur grasps Merlin's shoulder, hauls him forward, draws him close. Merlin snaps his hips harder, faster. His arms bulge from the strain of bracing himself, quiver with it. He slots in, then out, then his arms give, and he only shallow thrusts, panting hard, tremors lashing him, nose nuzzling Arthur's neck, the side of his face, his breath wet.

A hand palming Merlin's buttock, Arthur locks them tight together. They both still. Arthur's digs the imprint of his fingers well into the joint of Merlin's shoulders. His muscles seizing, his spine bending in an arch, a spasm, Merlin gasps. He comes. Arthur feels the wet of it trickle inside him. He cradles Merlin then, soothes his shivers, feels the pulse of them with his own body.

When Merlin pulls out, he feels it keenly. He winces against it. Merlin touches his face with his lips, pushes him back down, so Arthur lies flat on the bed, skates his mouth in a line from pectorals to belly. He takes him in his mouth, wets him from tip to root and sucks him in deep. Arthur's been travelling on the hairline of orgasm for too long. He cracks. He comes in stuttering pulses Merlin coughs away.

When they're finished, Merlin sinks at his side, the mattress hollowing around him. Arthur hooks an arm around his waist and pulls him close, interlocking their legs. He brushes his fingers up Merlin's spine, feeling the notches, his own fingers slipping in the sweat pooling in the dips between bumps. Burying his palm in Merlin's hair from the base up, he tilts his head towards him. He closes his eyes
then.

He could choose not to say it. He could keep the words to himself and let this be just a one off. After all, there's no way it can be anything other. Merlin's off to Moscow tomorrow and once there he might as well be on Mars. For a man like Arthur there's no crossing the iron curtain without it being a declaration of war of sorts. So it's over. Logically, it is. His veins constricting to smothering point, he says, “Don't go back to Russia tomorrow.” He stifles a breath. “Defect.”

Merlin's eyes open to a snap and slumber chases out of them. “They have my mother.”

“We can get her out.” They have saved Doctor Nemeth after all; there's nothing to say they can't rescue Merlin's mother too. That said, Nemeth wasn't on Russian soil at the time. Extricating someone from Russia itself, Arthur reckons, is going to be a true challenge. “Somehow.”

“That's not a plan,” Merlin says. “She'd die.”

“I don't think so.” Arthur would rather lay down his own life than let her. “And once she's free, you can come to Britain.”

“And be suspected of being a Moscow spy forever and ever?”

“My family's not as rich as it once was.” Father has squandered a lot in the name of politics. “But we still have a manor up in Scotland, funds, an ancient name that means credit. “You and your mother could go there.” And once Arthur weans his father off Whitehall intrigue making, they can perhaps rebuild a cleaner façade, become more reputable. “You'd love it there.”

“It's not just that, Arthur.” Merlin lowers his gaze. “I don't like my handlers. They're practically blackmailing me.”

Arthur is familiar with the experience. “All the more reason--”

“But I'm not going to defect.” Merlin's lips barely move. “I'm not betraying my country.”

“Merlin, your country has betrayed you.” The whole business with Merlin's father proves it for Arthur.

“Then why don't you do it?” Merlin raises an eyebrow. “Why don't you come over? They love British spies who go communist in Moscow. They parade them like a victory sign. They'd even give you a dacha, at least in the very beginning. Those Cambridge spies, MacLean and Burgess have done it. It's not unheard of.”

Arthur pictures it, giving himself over to the Russians. The picture fragments before it can come into focus. “I can't. I can't betray my country.”

“There you have it.” Merlin's smile falters. “Now you get me.”

“So what?” Arthur breathes it out like he's been punched.

“We make the most of tonight.” Merlin kisses him mouth open.
Merlin can hear the fleshy, slapping sound Arthur makes as he rubs his cock to stiffness. Breath sounding already laboured, Arthur rolls onto his side. The pillows sigh, deflate, sink in; the sheets rustle. Arthur pushes Merlin's leg forward with his knees, his front to Merlin's back. He doesn't need anything, not after their long night together, he just puts his cock inside Merlin and stills, palm flat on Merlin's belly, where it indents downwards towards his groin.

Arthur stutters a sob, gets halfway in.

The stretch stutters, puts a strain to Merlin's lungs, but there's a spark to it that Merlin likes.

Nestling further forward, large and with all the heat of his body, Arthur nuzzles Merlin's neck, a brush of lips light as a feather. He pulls back, then stuffs himself in again. He's in deeper now and the brush of it shocks Merlin's bones into liquefaction. Every exhalation, hot, scalding, Arthur breathes against his neck, muzzles wetly.

Resting his leg on top of Merlin's, he leveres in and out. Because of the position they're in, he can only do so much, though he can nudge quite deep. Merlin can feel the bluntness of him like a banked fire up his spine, like a spark in his tailbone.

As Arthur slides himself in in slow pokes, subtle half thrusts that have him half climbing Merlin, he lowers his hand in a slow swipe, calluses snagging against skin. He searches Merlin's pubic hair with his finger pads, nails scratching.

He grasps him and Merlin goes shockingly heavy. It's in his head and in his back, between his legs. It's like a low pulsing ache and a bright thrill both. He wants it to continue to build and he wants it to stop so he can finish. In long strokes Arthur pulls at him, fingers in a half curl. He rubs and twists, finds the slit with a finger. He probes it, slides the hood back, thumbs it.

Merlin thighs tighten. His fingers scrabble for the hardness of Arthur's hip.

Though he presses his face against the pillow case as a preventative measure, Merlin comes without a sound. He clenches around Arthur and Arthur spills into his body with a low sob.

When they're both done, Arthur tells him, “That was a good way to wake up.”

Merlin murmurs agreement. His bones are soft with the laxness of morning sex.

“I mean there are obviously others,” Arthur says, “but I quite favour this.”

“I'm partial to it too.” Merlin refuses to say that he'll miss this, though he will. Like a limb.

“Though a good cuppa is equally well appreciated.”

Merlin snorts, elbows Arthur. They keep silent for a few heartbeats; they stretch into a pleasant reverie.

Arthur sniffs the air. “I'm filthy. I ought to shower.” Arthur is still inside him, though. “Want to come with?”

Merlin knows he is too. He should to clean up and get a move on, but it's still early and he knows what kind of day he's got ahead, a plane in a few hours, an airport pick-up involving his minders, a
report to give at headquarters. He'd rather not move before he must. Let the day catch up with him as it will later. Now is for crystallising memories. Even if it wasn't, there's nothing much to look forward to in any of his prospects. "In a while."

Arthur combs his hair with his fingers, does it slowly front to back, until Merlin's muscles relax and his mind empties. He falls asleep.

With a shrill chirp the phone rings and jostles Merlin out of dream images that chase each other in a senseless fugue, Berlin, Caterina, the wide expanse of the Mediterranean as flames combust it orange. When he blinks his eyes open, his vision is still blurry with sleep, unfocused; light colours coalesce into whites and dark ones in a blurb of russels. Merlin knuckles his eyes.

He picks up the phone and says, "Pendragon."

A soft voice warbles out from the receiver.

Arthur frowns, purses his lip, but doesn't stop touching Merlin, his palm rubbing along arcs of bone and lengths of skin. His hands are constantly on his skin. "I'm supposed to be on a plane in--" He looks at the alarm clock placed on the nightstand. "Four hours."

Echoes of a reply waft through.

"I see," Arthur says, frowning deeply. "And you're sure it's meant for all three of us?"

The answer, whatever it entails, is short.

Arthur hums. "All right." He rubs at his knee. "I'll tell him."

When Arthur's hung up, Merlin sits up against the headboard with a pillow at his back. "What was that?"

"It was Mithian. She said we're expected at the Cabiria tonight."

"The mission's over." Merlin's brow furrows. He's sure Berounov would have told him if it wasn't. Then again he hasn't exactly made himself available these past twelve hours. "Are you sure I'm included?"

"Mithian was positive," Arthur says, leaning forward and placing a hand on his shoulder, kneading it in a wavelike motion. "You're under orders to go."

The restaurant has a large floor. Shiny marble tile in tones of cream and silver pave it. The salle à manger is high-ceilinged, the walls and cornices, which strike out in whorls and laurel vines, stuccoed. Pictures hang on partitions, gold framed, representing women with loose hair and translucent skin in artful nude poses. Round white-clad tables resplendent with silver cutlery rise like islands in the main dining hall.

The maître d' has a camellia pinned to his lapel. His tails brush his calves and the collar of his shirt comes in a line so stiff it's ruler-like. When Arthur says his name, the maître checks in his leather
bound log, then bows slightly and leads them to a parlour table. It's round, placed right under a chandelier, set with more glasses than there are places. It's the only one in this corner of the restaurant.

Alator sits at it clad in a formal suit but with his shirt unbuttoned at the top, no tie. Mithian, in evening gear, faces him. When she sees them, she stands. She kisses Arthur's cheek, the corner of Merlin's mouth, then sinks back down in a swish of satin and a cloud of fruity perfume.

Alator doesn't stand but says, “Any champagne, gentlemen?”

Arthur shakes his head.

Given that Merlin won't likely be offered any more champagne once he gets back home, not unless he gets invited to dinner by some apparatchik or other wanting to get the pulse of current espionage, he says, “Yes.”

They take seats at the table and Alator fills all of their glasses barring Arthur's. When the waiter comes, he sends him away with a subtle sideways motion of the chin.

That's Merlin's cue to ask, “So why did you gather us here?”

“Ah, Russians, always practical.” Alator drains his glass. “But in fact I did have a reason for asking you to dinner that has zilch to do with this place's stand out abbacchio.”

While Mithian inclines her head at Alator, Arthur moves his chair closer to the table.

Merlin pricks his ears.

“A fresh emergency has arisen.” Alator empties his glass and fills it again. He doesn't touch it; rather he studies Merlin, Arthur and Mithian's faces. “It involves a secret organisation threatening half the world with financial collapse.” He stares at his glass before addressing his audience again. I've had a chat with your bosses and given the success of our Italian mission, they've decided to team us up again.

“Wait, wait.” Arthur knits his brow in a tight net of lines. “What does that mean exactly?”

“It means that in view of how good we were at staving off a nuclear winter, we're going to form a joint task force.” Alator waves the waiter away once again. “You'll serve under my command, be an intervention team, and put paid to threats that affect the interests and safety of our respective countries.”

“And Moscow agrees with this?” Merlin can scarcely credit it. They love their confidentiality there, their opacity, their secret mongering. Not that other governments are that keen on openness and collaboration either, but this is really a first from his country. Well, at least since the end of the war. “Do NATO powers?”

“The US and Britain agree with the USSR as to the strategic importance of our team. They want it in action.” Alator tilts his empty glass this way and that so it catches the light. “They think that together we stand more of a chance against free agents who'd take over world power.” He puts the glass down and clears his throat. “Of course this is strictly confidential, for your eyes only, bla bla bla. Bottom line is no one can really know about the existence of our task force.”

“So no one can know about our successes?” Arthur asks.

“Does Six generally publicise them?” Alator nocks an eyebrow.
“No,” Arthur says. “No.”

“No, nothing will change then for you.” Alator opens the menu. “Our countries' intelligence services want to be able to tout their horn on when reporting to their governments. They want to be able to say they staved off all dangers to their country’s integrity by themselves.” Alator smacks his lips together. “The truth will be different but then again spies rarely broadcast the truth.”

“How long is this team going to be in place?” Mithian asks, leaning forward, palm on her cheek.

“For as long as threats arise.” Alator scans the menu, then snaps it shut.

“And this is it?” Merlin needs to verify. “No one is going to blame us for collaborating with the enemy, for working with rival powers?”

“Not when the enemy is providing precious intel.” Alator hails the waiter, who's busy two tables over. “In that case fraternising is convenient.”

“So we're officially in a team together?” Mithian smiles and her complexion glows because of it.

“Truth be told, we're unofficially partnered, but, yes, that's the gist of it. We even have a code name: W.A.R.T.” Alator turns towards the waiter when he approaches. “I'll have the sole.”

When Arthur, Mithian and Merlin have ordered and the waiter is gone, Alator picks up the topic again. “Of course, I can't draft you into this.” He picks up the napkin, which has been done up to form a peacock tail, and spreads it on his knees. “So the question is, are you in or are you out?”

“Are you asking us if we want to work together?” Mithian asks.

“Put in very simple terms--” Alator shows his empty hands. “Yes, folks, that's what I'm doing.”

Mithian slaps her hand on the table and says, “Oh, yes.”

Sharing a look, a half smile that tightens the eyes, and curls the lips, Merlin and Arthur both nod. Merlin doesn't trust himself with more then that. Being who they are, they can't let what's between them out into the open. Too many people would use it against them. But this is a chance to stick together a while longer, to work side by side again, to watch out for Arthur, and that's something he can't say no to. His heart wouldn't let him.

“Good.” Alator says, picking up fork and fish knife as he sees the waiter approaching with a wide salver. “Because you're all booked on a plane to Istanbul.”

End Notes

Bernauer Strasse is and was a realy road. Before its buildings were razed to stop flight attempts, it was often used as a starting point for getaways, through roofs or windows. Some ended tragically.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernauer_Stra%C3%9Fe

Century House was the former MI6 headquarters.
Works inspired by this one: "I Spy" by LFB72

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